



**Redefining the Japanese Identity through Art of Resistance:
Butoh's Deviation from Tradition in the Postwar Era**

2021, Reischauer Scholars Program, Graphic Novel by Abby Lu



Butoh is a Japanese dance theatre created by Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ôno in 1959 in the wake of WWII that helped rebuilt an independent Japanese identity.



It was formed partly in response to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which decimated the Japanese landscape and psyche.



Butoh is the rejection of the American occupation of Japan and the entailing, forcibly integrated cultural values such as the feeble promise of "Democracy."



Like contemporary Japanese society struggling to rebuild a cultural narrative while being under occupation but subject to the influences of Japanese tradition, Butoh dances reflected both Eastern and Western values.



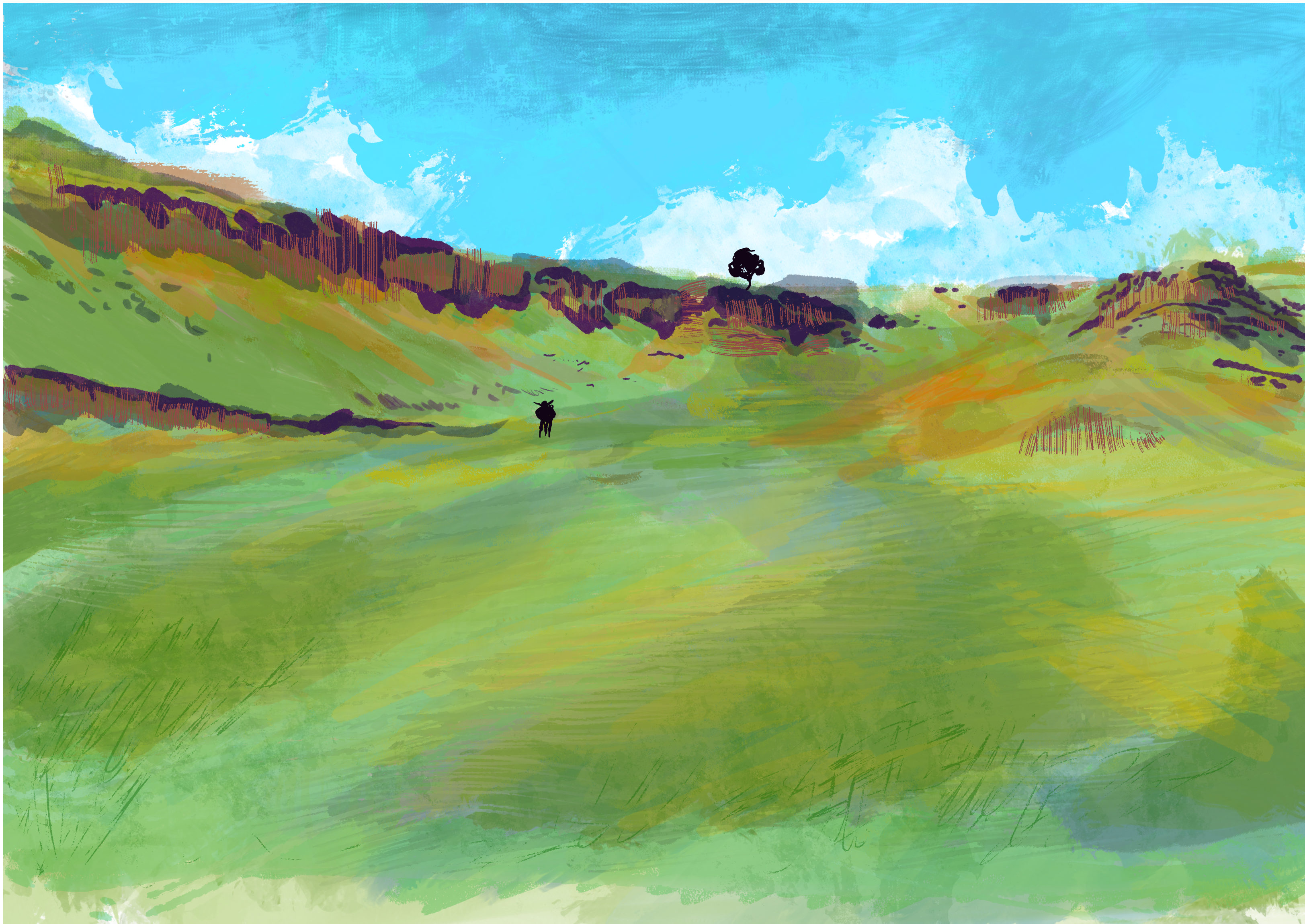
Butoh's aesthetic resembles many traditional Japanese arts, such as Kabuki, Noh, and Ukiyo-E.



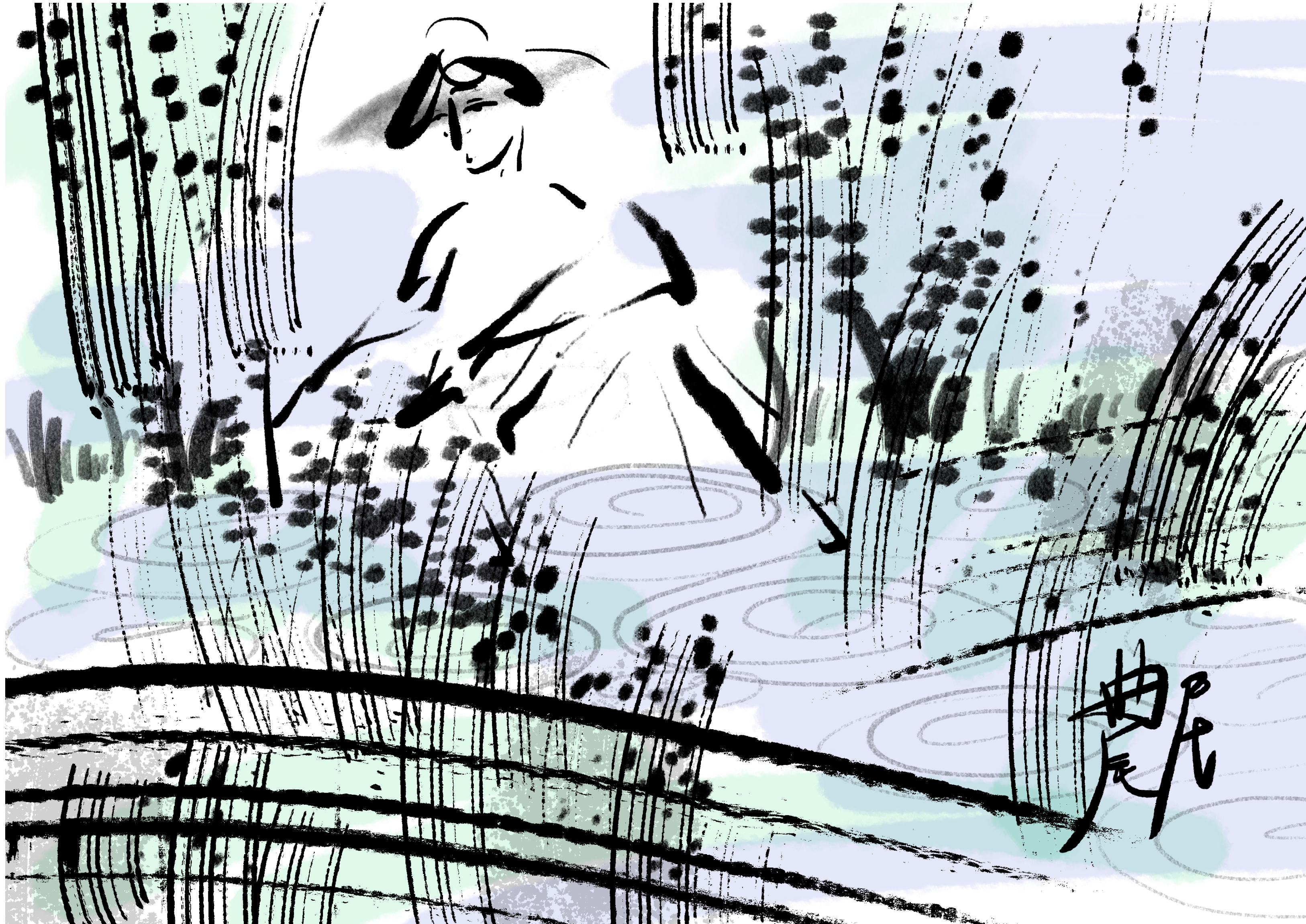
In addition to Eastern influences, Butoh is heavily inspired by the emotional focus of French Surrealist literature, German Expressionism, and German Tanz Neue.



Instead of imitating traditional forms of Eastern and Western art, Butoh focuses on the organic human body, the only constant in a chaotic postwar Japanese world, as the ultimate source of artistic inspiration.



Despite receiving Eastern and Western influences, Butoh ultimately rejects both classical artistic models and instead adopts the identity of rustic premodern Japan. This harkening to nature also protests against the bombing and its unnatural aftermath.



Butoh harkens back to the rural Tōhoku region and the Nōmin (farmer) culture.



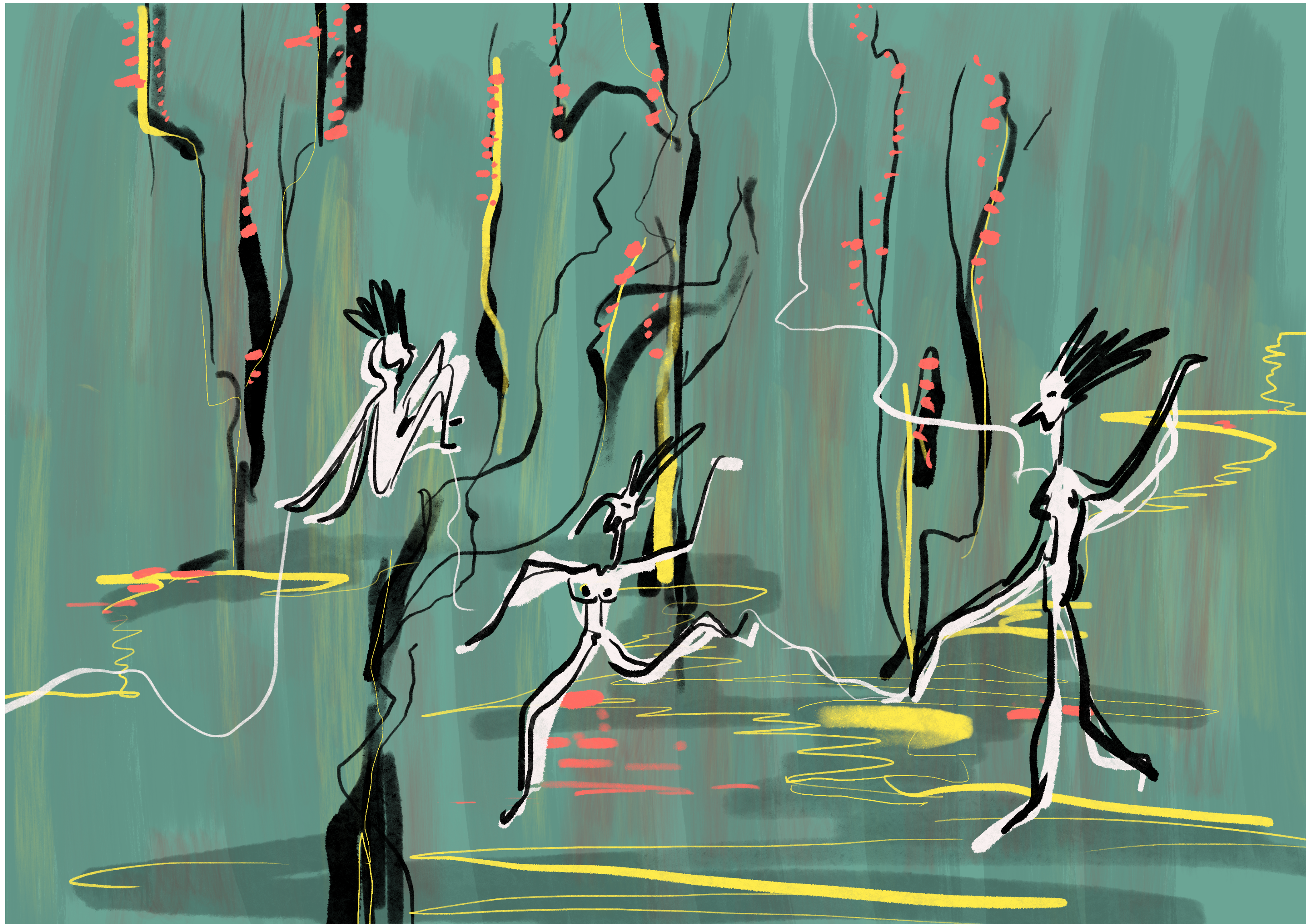
Butoh honors the dark Tōhoku night skies and regional folk traditions deemed "backward" by American occupation and capitalism.



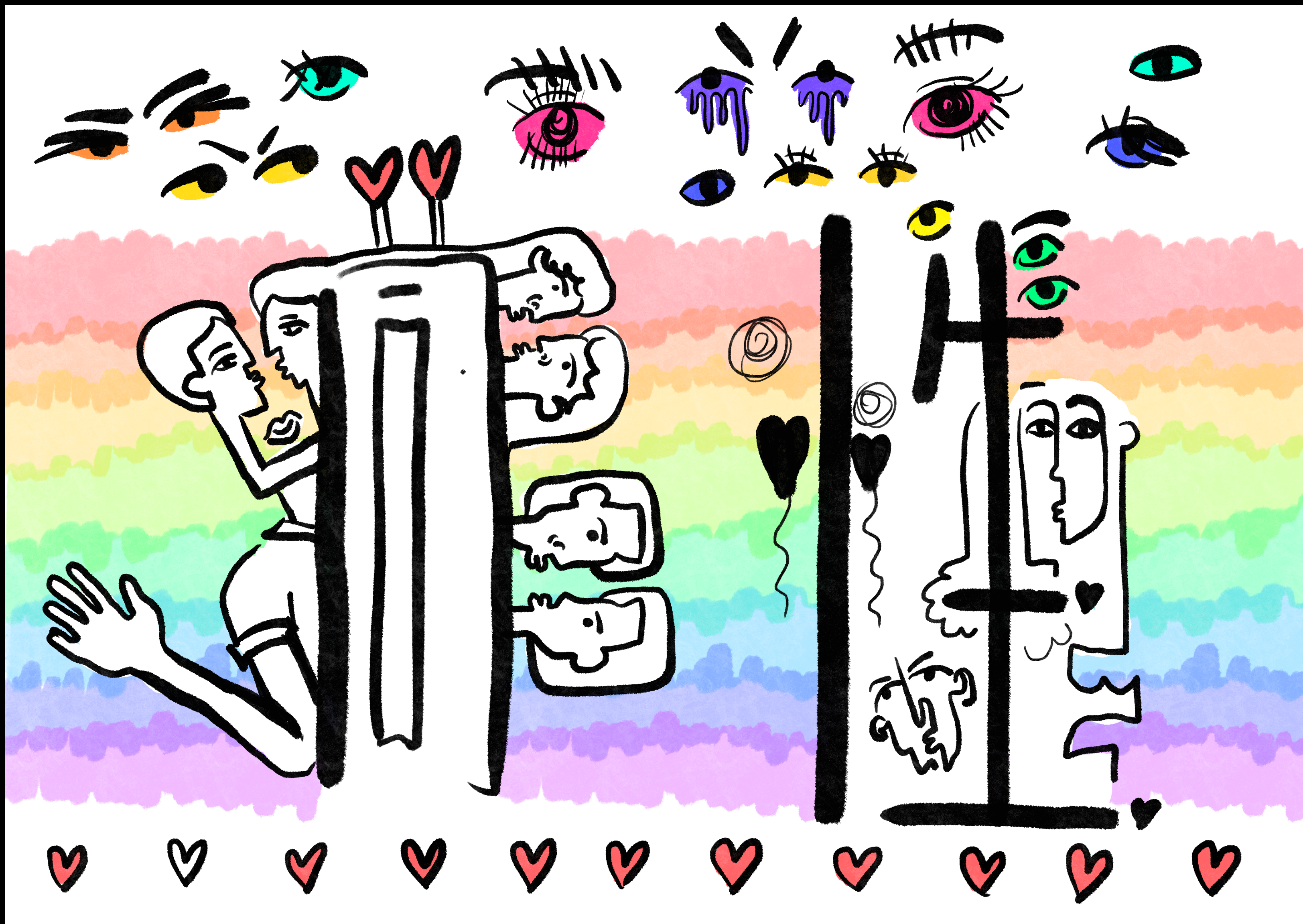
Butoh's theme of "Darkness," shown through its unconventional dance forms and philosophy, provides the perfect habitat for socially rejected values and a language to voice the marginalized people.



Marginalized identities that Butoh uplifts include widows, war veterans, and the hibakusha, surviving victims of the atomic bombing.



Butoh echos the philosophy of Wabi-Sabi, a view embracing the imperfect and even the conventionally ugly, in its exaltation of rejected identities.



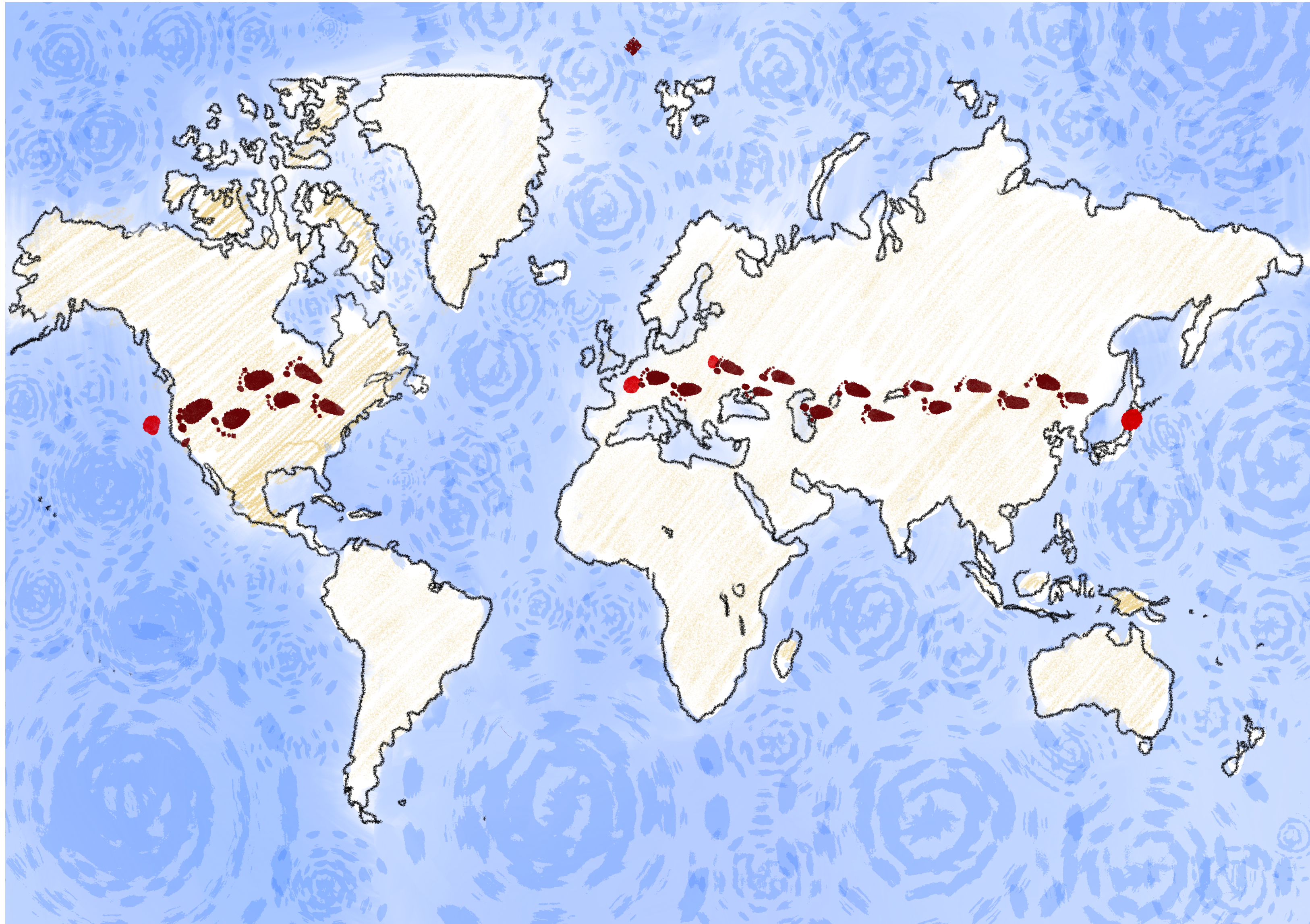
The first Butoh performance in 1959, Kinjiki, drove the audience out of the theatre and caused Hijikata to be ostracized from the contemporary dance because it featured homosexuality, which was considered scandalous and taboo in Japan.



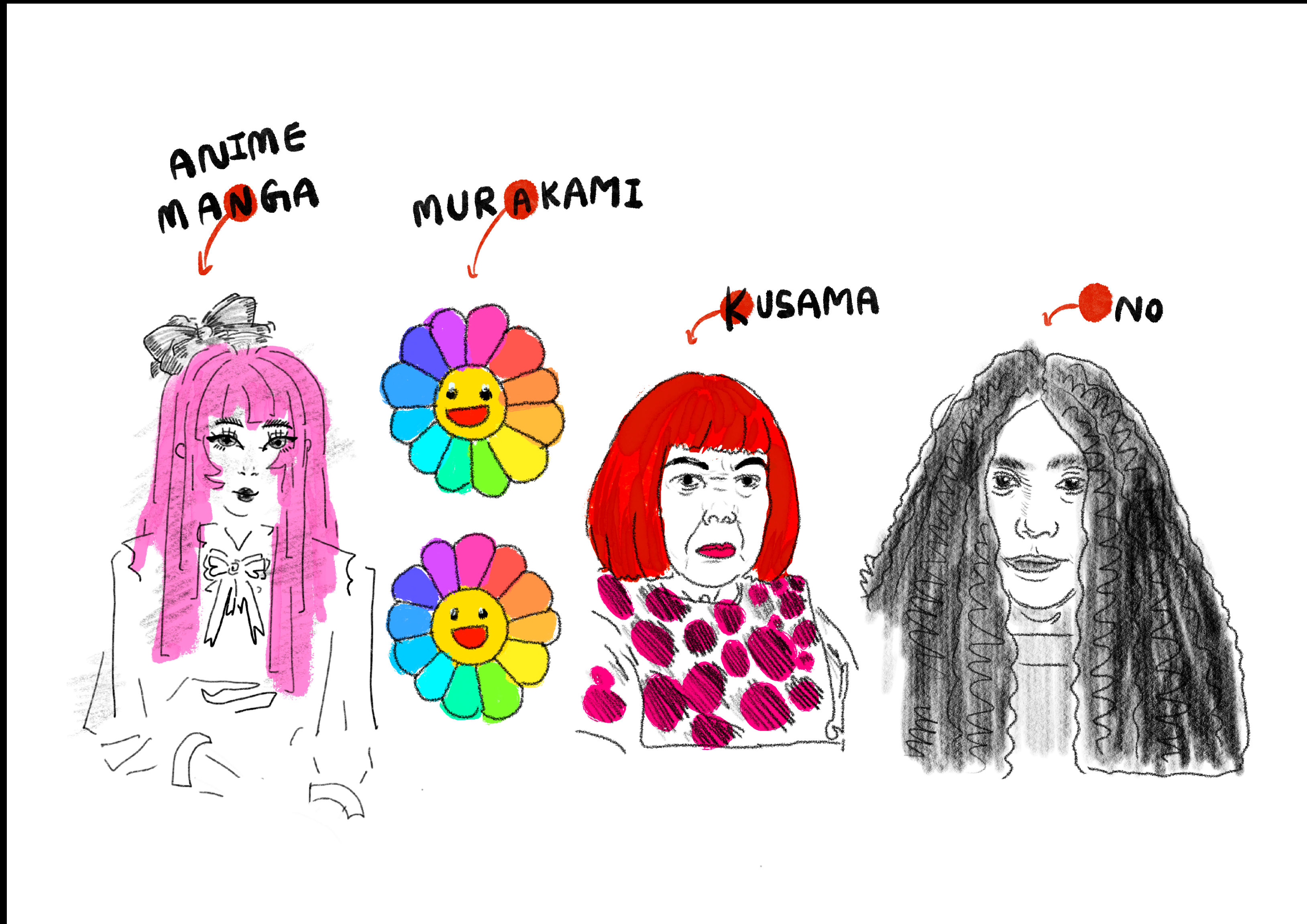
Butoh also defies gender binaries. Hijikata believed that his older sister also inhabited his body and adapt the decorum of a woman for some time. Dancers also often cross-dress and appear androgynous due to the layers of white paint and clothing covering their bodies.



Butoh dancers often seek to constantly shift forms and exalt the vulgar, which are practices echoing the Buddhist concept of Kannon (compassion) toward everything indiscriminately.



Despite its initial poor reception in Japan, Butoh has become renowned in the Western world and Japan. Notable Butoh companies include Sankai Juku and Dairakudakan.



In accentuating the human body as the ultimate source of inspiration, Butoh was instrumental in cultivating self-reliance, and not reliance on the pre-established external or traditional art forms, in contemporary Japanese art.

Thank you!

please email ABBYLUYUEXI@GMAIL.COM if you would like to read my research, also titled
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