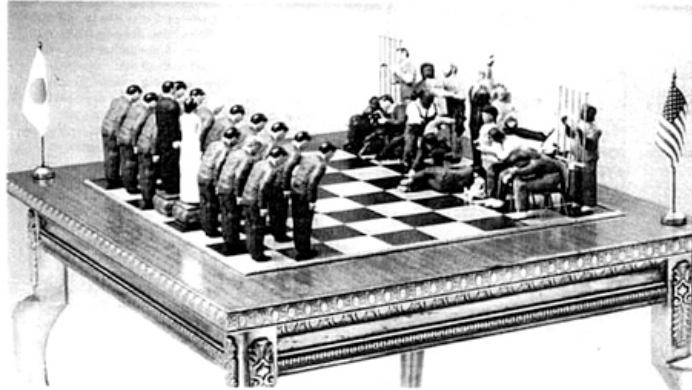


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Checkmate

If a picture alone is worth a thousand words, then Ed Massey's sculpture *チェックメイト* is arguably the most powerful, provocative and illustrative comparison of the world's two economic giants.

The piece, whose title translates as "Checkmate" particularly focuses on the disarray and deteriorating position of the United States. Among the societal ills presented is an ineffectual education system, homeless population, urban violence, an explosive crime rate, the alarming rate of teenage pregnancies, the decline of American industry and a legacy of America's best and brightest scientific minds wasted.

Massey says, "Visual impact. That's what makes sculpture so uniquely effective as social commentary. When properly utilized, it can arouse passions and evoke responses from viewers who may by chance come upon a sculpture, or who would flip the channel or turn the page when presented with similar commentary from a different forum."

This is starkly contrasted to that which characterizes Japanese society: homogeneity, male-domination, uniformity, discipline, orderliness, rigidity and individual sacrifice for the common good.

The artist's statement follows:

チェックメイト is a critical examination of the competition between the world's two economic giants.

On one side is the United States, a power in decline and nation in disarray; on the other, Japan, a nation that in less than fifty years has transformed itself into an economic power and chief rival to a country responsible for its rebuilding.

Each side is comprised of sixteen figures.

The American line-up, collectively, reflects the country's decay and steadily deteriorating infrastructure.

Two inattentive students depict an education system in dire need of overhaul. Academic achievement suffers from unmotivated and undisciplined students, overcrowded classrooms, understaffed schools

and under-qualified teachers. Moreover, budget cuts have forced even the most elite institutions to drop programs in many disciplines. This all translates into future generations ill-equipped to compete against global rivals.

The likelihood for educational and economic development is much more remote for those caught in the high incidence of single teenage motherhood, or what amounts to children bearing children. Such mothers often find it impossible to care for themselves, let alone their offspring. The square shared by a child sitting beneath her pregnant teenage mother is an indictment of the family, community, church and state's inability to confront the stark realities of teenage pregnancy and reverse the great human and economic costs associated with it.

Perhaps the most somber and sobering of the figures is the homeless woman sprawled over three squares, one hand resting on the base of the Statue of Liberty. She lies at the foot of the American icon on which is inscribed "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" In bitter irony, the U.S. cannot take care of its own exploding hungry, destitute and homeless population. The gravity of the problem is reflected by a second figure offering work in exchange for food, in what has become a common sight in cities throughout the country.

The activity near the center of the line-up shows a middle-aged workman defending himself against a young assailant. The man unknowingly is about to be shot by the assailant's partner. It is an all too common scene of the Black on Black urban violence that has grown epidemic in scope. Products of abject inner city conditions, an intolerable proportion of young Black males are caught in the criminal justice system. Murder is their leading cause of death. They are a part of a system and culture seemingly unable to correct itself and part of a problem so severe that there are no short-term solutions.

Sitting on wooden crates, two assembly line workers consult their manual in order to proceed with their tasks. It is a scene symbolic of the decline of American industry and workmanship, particularly the once dominant domestic auto sector that has lost its standing and reputation to foreign competition, in large measure because of its own neglect and short-sightedness.

The United States, however, has not lost its reputation for its thriving prison population. No country in the world, not even South Africa, incarcerates its population at a higher rate. Of course, it is America's out-of-control crime rate that has its prisons bursting at the seams, as depicted by the jailed figures. For many with no hope of becoming productive members of society, prison is not a deterrent. And many criminals know that with an over-taxed criminal justice system, odds of doing time may be in their favor. Long-term solutions are years away, short-term—build more prisons.

Whereas its most formidable economic rivals have been able to devote their research and development energies toward commercial technologies, the United States, burdened as the defender of the Western world, has invested staggering sums into military R & D (research and development). In the same vein, and as presented by the corresponding scene, many of America's best and brightest scientific minds have applied their talents to defense related research rather than that with civilian applications.

Lastly, the President stands erect, his attention directed at his opponent.

The Japanese line-up in stark contrast, consists of His Majesty the Emperor, Her Majesty the Empress and 14 nearly identical figures bowing in unison toward their opponent. Together they represent a society that has achieved remarkable success over the latter part of this century.

It is a society noted for orderliness, discipline, uniformity, conformity, efficiency and individual sacrifice for the common good. The rigid structure of Japanese society has benefited the country in many ways, however, it has also stifled creativity.

The Japanese figures, in addition, draw attention to two of the most visible elements of Japanese society, its homogeneous composition and stringent male-orientation. Whereas professional women in the United States hit a glass ceiling in their attempts to attain middle and upper management positions, their counterparts in Japan, for the most part, are excluded from all but the most base clerical jobs. Japan's chauvinism is not only gender specific, but ethnic as well. The country takes such great pride in its homogeneity and attaches such importance to it, the generations of Japanese of non-ethnic descent cannot attain full citizenship.

Finally, the stately elegance of the table defines the importance of the competition. Of course, the one-sidedness of the confrontation is confirmed by Japan's declaration of *チェックメイト* before the match has even begun.

—ED MASSEY

