

Japanning LONDON

Yolanda Zappaterra talks to designer Koji Mizutani about his work and involvement with Selfridges' forthcoming Tokyo Life, London Life exhibition

KOJI MIZUTANI, one of Japan's leading designers, has a new mantra for the new millennium, and he's pushing it with the zeal of any recent convert. "New design, new communication," he enunciates carefully to me, at least five times, during our meeting in the draughty, cavernous reception area of London's Berners Hotel, where Mizutani is temporarily resident.

With 24 years' experience as a designer and art director in Tokyo, you'd expect him to be big on communication. But it's only in the last two of those years that he's become so emphatic about "new communication", and it's the Merry project – which has brought him to London – that's behind this new-found enthusiasm, because the success, wealth and fame acquired in Japan's – and Mizutani's – boom years of the 1980s weren't enough. "Something was missing. There was lots of money, lots of work, I was very busy. But I wasn't happy," admits Mizutani.

That may be because, having set up his own design office, Mizutani Studio, in 1983, after a six-year stint at the Nippon Design Centre, he quickly became a darling of the fashion and advertising worlds, with all their glamour, wealth and aspirational messages. Clients included Seibu, Virgin and international fashion companies. Awards included gold medals from the New York Art Directors Club and the International Poster Biennale in Warsaw, and

requests for additions to collections came in from museums worldwide.

But beyond that patchy PR-supplied information lies a past that Mizutani is not keen to discuss. It's as though, having reinvented himself and found his calling as a communicator rather than image-maker, the dapper 50-year-old, even indoors bundled up in scarf, overcoat and polo neck against the driving sleet outside, simply wants to forget 22 of his past 24 years in design. Could it be that he's astounded of them?

"I became a graphic designer so I could deliver a message, and maybe even have a chance to change things, not to become rich, but somewhere I'd lost direction, lost meaning," he says candidly. Salvation came through two peculiar routes; the recession and the Kobi earthquake of 1995.

"What was a terrible time for so many and still is, was a lucky point for me. I lost a lot of work and clients, but I found more time to do my own work, and move away from commercial work to more political work. I was asked by the [Japanese] government to produce some posters that would offer hope to the victims of the Kobi earthquake, and that was a turning point. Here was meaningful work that I could

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Above: HFX cosmetics poster, 1990. Right: Swatch Japan poster, 1990

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From Top: Koji Mizutani; Merry postcards; Left: Merry book cover 2000

do because I'd earned so much during the boom years of the 1980s. I could do public projects for little or no money. I knew already that what makes you happy isn't money, so I wasn't scared of not having it," says Mizutani happily.

Another changing aspect was the move away from conspicuous wealth in design projects. "At the time, Japanese graphic design was all about spending lots of money in order to create high-quality work, irrespective of what the work was about. Design was becoming more like highly qualified craftsmanship, rather than art-related image-making. In printing, paper, repro, colours and so on, everything had to be rich, sumptuous, and the message was lost," recalls Mizutani.

"At the same time, political posters were coming out of Eastern Europe where the printing quality was terrible – only two colours, printed on cheap paper – but the message, the design, was so much stronger. It was clearly communicating, and it led me to the realisation that I had to forget everything and start again, to rethink what communication meant and getting messages to the people," explains Mizutani.

Strange then that a trip to the U.S. paeon advertising, confusion marketing and the brand, should provide Mizutani with his new direction. From capturing on film the exuberance of three young girls on a bus, came a book which led to the idea of similarly capturing the energy ▶



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