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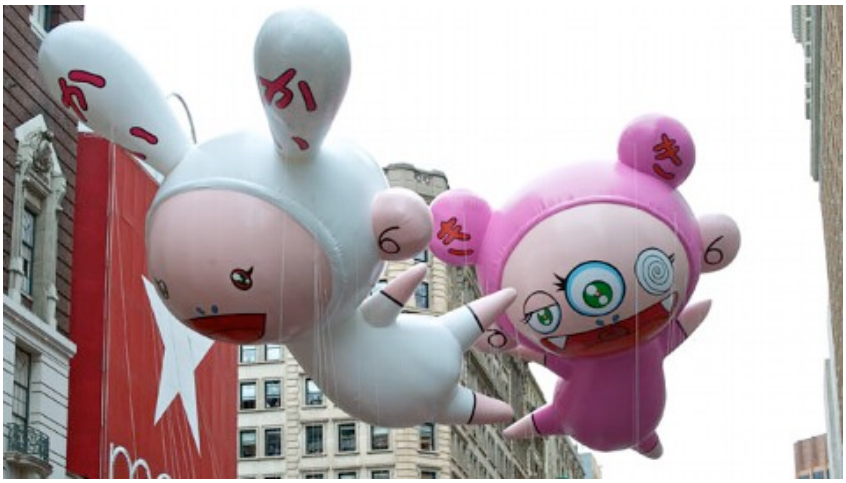
Contemporary Art in Japan

The cultural developments in Japan since World War II, such as manga, anime, kawaii, otaku, eros and gender roles, have lead to a movement that is changing the way people in the "East" and "West" both create and critique contemporary art. Japan has had a near constant flow of Western influence since the late 1800s, but the flow of culture has not been completely one-sided in any way. We have seen in many instances how Japan has exported its unique, cultural identity throughout the world, like its simple, artistic influences on the impressionism movement in Europe, or the Western rendition of Akira Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai*. Japan's cultural exports have never been more apparent than in the last couple of decades, when artists such as Yoshimoto Nara, Mariko Mori, Mr. and Takashi Murakami have "...established their presence on the international art scene"(Fleming 9). Why are these artists emerging in popularity now, and how do their works of art reflect their feelings about Japanese society? Are viewers of Murakami's exhibitions in Los Angeles, New York and Paris able to understand the underlying social commentary of his paintings? Do the Japanese themselves appreciate these new artworks as much as the rest of the world? The goal of this research paper is to try to answer some of these questions by looking at the artworks, words and lives of some of these contemporary artists.

Takashi Murakami was born in 1962 in Tokyo, Japan during its post-Word War II, economic recovery years. He went on to attend the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music where he finished in 1993 with a B.A and M.A. in Fine Arts and a P.H.D.(kaikaikiki). Murakami has become a world-renowned artist by creating an "...astonishing array of paintings, sculpture, film, video, and consumer items"(Fleming 36), including two, giant balloons modeled after Murakami's company's name and mascots, "kaikai" and "kiki," who flew over Manhattan in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. In 1996 Murakami founded the Hiropon Factory which was essentially a place where a small group of people helped him work on his projects. By 2001,



Above the cute kaikai and monstrous kiki entertain crowds at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

> ...when I had a solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, the Hiropon Factory had grown into a professional art production and management organization. That same year I registered the company officially as "Kaikai Kiki Co.,Ltd." To this day it has developed into an internationally-recognized, large-scale art-production and artist management corporation...(kaikai kiki).

The driving force behind the creativity which brought him and his company such large popularity, is a term he coined in 1999 known as “Superflat.” According to Murakami, the word originated as a sales pitch by two LA gallerists who wished to sell some of his paintings. They described one by stating, “how about this painting? It’s super flat, super high-quality, super clean!”(Murakami 153) Murakami noticed a fundamental truth in these words pertaining to the Japanese culture. That is why he started the three-part superflat project, “...as a critical endeavor to overcome that sales pitch.” In this endeavor, Murakami looked at the vertical axis of time and the horizontal cultural axis revolving around, “manga, animation, fashion, music, and anything happening now in the creative world.”

The first installment called Superflat took place in 2000 in the form of a publication and series of exhibitions including other artists from the “superflat” community. It started as a traveling exhibition in Japan but eventually branched out to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle. The publication introduced the idea of superflat to the world, cross-referencing Japan’s two-dimensional paintings of the past with the cultural “flatness” of Japan today, which is dominated by anime, manga and other virtual realities. In the end reads a statement, “I would like you, the reader, to experience the moment when the layers of Japanese culture -- such as Pop, Erotic Pop, *otaku*, and H.I.S.-ism[international tourism fostered by the cut-rate travel agency H.I.S]--fuse into one. One of the things I found most interesting about this exhibition was the statues. Statues

of cute manga/anime women and men were depicted as three-dimensional sculptures, rendered in elaborate detail, with disproportionate body features and all.

In 2002, the second installment of the Superflat series entitled “Coloriage” was held at the Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art in Paris(Murakami 156). Murakami thought it would be appropriate to have his second installment take place in France, where the Japonisme art movement started so many years ago. According to Murakami, Superflat had yet to lose its subculture identity by this point, but in both America and France, the exhibition was invited as an “art exhibition.” This may be because it is hard for one to see through something like Superflat when confronted by those same cultural images every day. It may take an outsider to appreciate the paradigm shift in the way we view art. Because of a certain piece by Murakami from the Coloriage exhibit, entitled *Kawaii! Vacances d’ete(above)*, the Japanese term kawaii is now famous in France. This painting is a very good literal example of “super-flatness.” The vast array of bright, warm colors are placed in the painting just so, so that the painting lacks any depth and the flowers feel almost cartoony. The painting is executed so well by the Kaikai Kiki staff, that the painting almost looks like it was done by a computer, but this is not true. All of Murakami’s paintings and sculptures are painted by hand either by Murakami himself or by his staff. I believe this is a good example of where Murakami tries to blend the line between subculture and fine art. The subject matter itself is very cute or “kawaii” like

that of a children's anime show, but the process behind the production of this art piece is very professional and taken very seriously. I believe that many art critics from the West view Murakami's artwork like that of a cultural anthropologist. They appreciate the usually subjective cute nature of the painting from an objective, almost scientific point of view.

Little Boy is the last installment of the *Superflat* trilogy. Alexandra Munroe from her essay, "Introducing Little Boy" in the book *Little Boy*, states about the first to installments, "According to Murakami's Superflat thesis, brilliant color, planar surfaces, stylized features, and the absence of illusionistic space define a lineage in Japanese art that links Rinpa screens to *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints to early modern *Nihonga* painting, and ultimately to postwar manga and anime."(Murakami 244) In these exhibits Neo-pop artists such as Yoshimoto Nara, Chiho Aoshima and others, juxtaposed their art next to famous anime and manga icons like Galaxy Express 999 and Hakabe no Kitaro. According to Murakami, the Western value differences between "high" and "low" art never existed in premodern Japan. The term *bijutsu* (fine arts) was created by the Meiji restoration government in an effort to compete with the rest of the world in all cultural arenas. According to Munroe, the final installment of the Superflat series took the narrative deeper into the Japanese psyche "to identify the terrifying fantasies of a graphic subculture centered on the imagery of atomic explosion and post-apocalyptic salvation, monsters born of radioactive mutations, and intergalactic warfare between mystically empowered Japanese and technologically advanced aliens." Of course the title of the ex-

hibit refers the first use of the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan in 1945 by the U.S.

I spent a lot of time reading the publication *Little Boy* and the essays that accompanied it because many of the topics written in the book correlated with most of the subject-matter that we covered in both The Japanese Mind and in Japanese Pop Culture. As stated in the quote before, much of the pop-cultural references from Japan, like manga and anime, deal with post apocalyptic worlds, empowered Japanese and mythical lands. The first half of the book *Little Boy* is a collection of large pictures of anime and manga, flipping every other page with images and descriptions of real-life events like the atomic bombs or artists' exhibits. I believe that this half of the book is structured very much like the actual exhibit was in Brooklyn N.Y. At first I thought this book was a random collection of Japanese art and culture, but the more I learned about the artists, I realized that there was a message.

The first ten exhibits from the book are directly linked and portray a message. the first is titled "Taro Okamoto." It shows the artist Taro Okamoto in front of the his gigantic, iconic sculpture "Tower of the Sun" with his famous phrase stylistically written across the front in Japanese and English, "Art Is Explosion!" The second exhibit is a massive explosion scene like that of an atomic bomb from the animation DAICON IV shown at the opening of the 22nd Japan SF Convention held in Osaka in 1983. This annual SF convention started in 1962 and "remains an event by *otaku* for *otaku*, predating the term *otaku* itself, which did not enter public discourse until the late 1980s. The people who created this six-minute-long video are the same people who went on to create the fa-

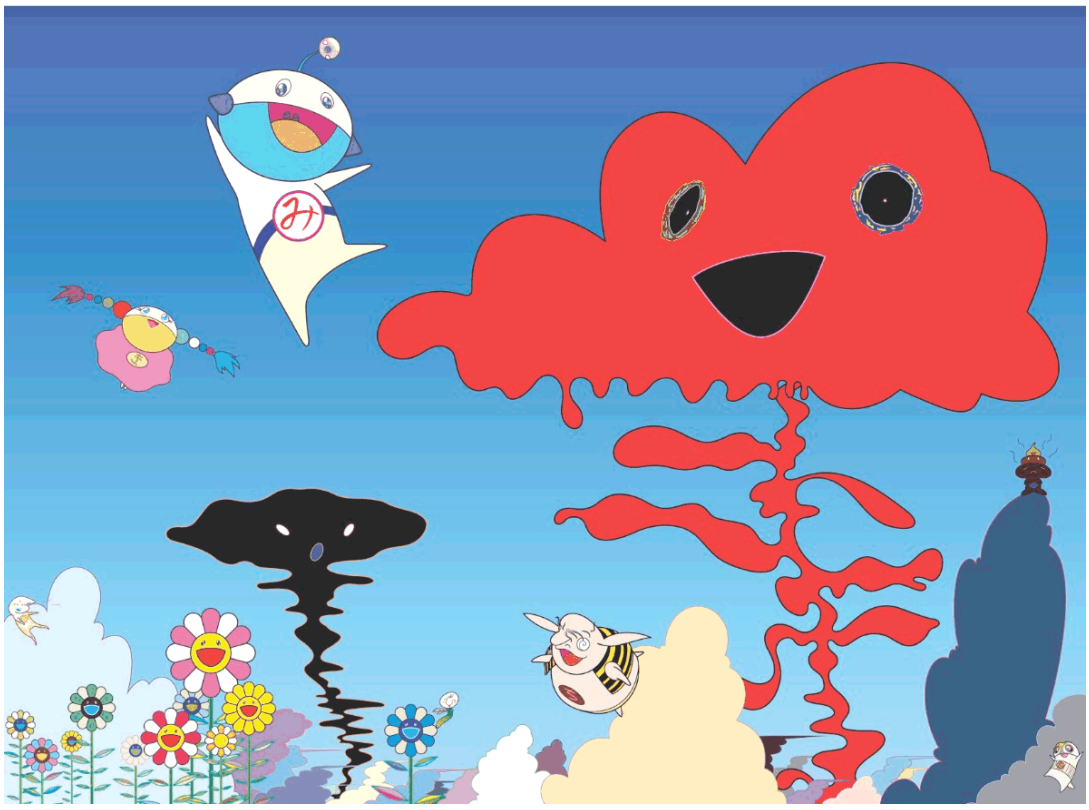
mous *Neon Genesis Evangelion* in 1990s which also dealt with a post-apocalyptic world in which giant humanoid robots dueled in explosive fight scenes. The number three entree is about the *Time Bokan* animated series from 1975 - 76. At the end of each episode in the series, the villains would be defeated at which point a giant skull-shaped

mushroom cloud would appear, although they would be miraculously restored to their normal, evil selves the next episode. The entry includes a plate of the image of the skull cloud that is very similar to the following entry made by Murakami himself.

The number four entry is a little bio about Takashi Murakami. The page opposite to the bio is taken up by *Time Bokan - Pink* by Murakami. It looks very similar to the screenshot in the *Time Bokan* anime, but is different at the same time. The Murakami painting has a little black inverted cloud about the main skull cloud which I believe represents the second use of the atomic bomb in Nagasaki. Another difference can be seen in the eyes of the skull cloud. The pupils and irises are comprised of many multicolored, smiling flowers that are found throughout all of Murakami's exhibits. It is in these flowers that , "Murakami self-mockingly portrays the confounding tendency of Japanese culture to find cuteness in an icon of war."(Murakami 14) Reading this last statement gave me a major clue as to why Murakami chose to include these seemingly random entries into his book, the main part

being themes of atomic fallout and post-war occupation finding its way into Japanese entertainment. From this point of view, it is logical that the following entries were a picture of the hydrogen bomb mushroom cloud, the destruction of Hiroshima, Godzilla burning Tokyo to the ground, article nine of the Japanese constitution (disbanding of the Japanese military), and finally the famous *Ultraman* series.

In the explanation of each of these entries, Murakami links the effects of the war to these shows that were developed in the 1960s and 70s. The creators of these shows revealed their feelings about a country which no longer held any military power and which purposely evaded the subject of its recent military conquests. He uses *Ultraman* as an example of this. The creator of the show hailed from Okinawa, the small island in Japan who's small amount of land was occupied for a good part of the 20th century by American forces. It is very interesting then that Eiji Tsuburaya would make the main protagonist in his show hail from another planet instead of Japan.



Murakami argues that shows like *Godzilla* and the *Ultra* series laid the groundwork for shows like *Mobile Suit Gundam* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and in doing so the entire *otaku* culture. By laying out what he thinks to be the lineage of a main part of Japanese sub-culture, Murakami brings us one step closer to understanding what he is trying to convey in his art. He believes that *otaku* culture has had a direct influence on mainstream Japan in the 1990s and today.

One of Murakami's paintings seems more representative of his feelings on contemporary Japan than all of the others. It's called "Eco Eco Rangers Earth Force," 2005(pictured above) and it was used as a banner to promote the *Little Boy* exhibit sponsored by the Japan Society in New York. Murakami again draws from a longstanding Japanese television series aimed at school children between the ages of 3 - 7 which consists of "the gang of five, a group of five pals, often mounted on motorbikes, dedicated to defending justice and fighting evil." (Martinez 38) If you look close at the "Eco Eco Rangers" each of them has a circle on their chest with a hiragana symbol in the center. Each of the hiragana are colored according to the five most popular colors used in all of the ranger shows: red, blue, yellow, pink and green (sometimes black). What Murakami does with these rangers is very intriguing. In the painting, two atomic bombs have just exploded creating black and red mushroom clouds with faces. The whole scene is very cute and immature like it was drawn by a child. A strong wind is blowing to the right, probably caused by the fallout, carrying the wobbly clouds away. The rangers themselves are floating around without any apparent power to combat what is happening. They just smile like the flowers and clouds and look cute. In the meantime a sixth ranger

is sitting in a *zazen* meditative position, with what looks like stinking poop on his head(which is smiling as well), clearly disappointed with the whole scenario which surrounds him. If you look closely at the bottom left-hand corner one of the flowers is actually crying instead of smiling.

I can't help but imagine that the sixth ranger represents Murakami viewing mainstream Japan today and imagining what it must look like to the rest of the world, Superflat. I believe that both *otaku* and *kawaii* cultures are the result of the winds of consequence created by the bombs that ended the war with Japan. Murakami wishes to bring Japans subculture up to the surface of public discourse. He believes that therein lies the future of contemporary art. I want to include a quote from the essay "On the Battlefield of 'Superflat' subculture and art in postwar Japan" by Noi Sawaragi, who is both a contemporary and friend of Murakami's. I believe that it will help conclude what I have learned about Murakami and also introduce other artists that are part of his movement:

> "If we find anything authentic in the work of Japanese Neo Pop that goes beyond the simplistic label of Far Eastern Pop Art, it lies in the artists' sober acknowledgement of Japan's paradoxical history. the true achievement of Japanese Neo Pop, then, is that it gives form to the distortion of history that haunts Japan--by reassembling fragments of history accumulated in *otaku's* private rooms and liberating them from their confinement in an imaginary reality through a critical reconstitution of subculture... ...In essence, Japanese Neo Pop, as exemplified by the work of Takashi Mu-

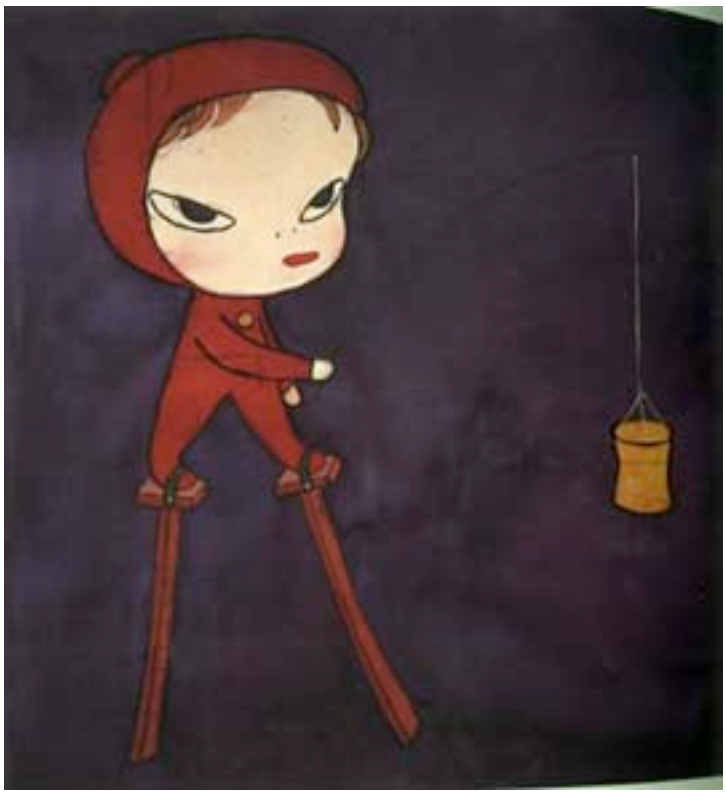
> rakami among others, visualizes the historical distortion of Japan for the eyes of the whole world."(Murakami 205)

I believe Murakami wants all the emerging contemporary artists in Japan to take the future of art into their own hands and give their own definitions to high and low art. For too long they have had the cultural labels and paradigms of the West imposed upon them. With the Superflat movement, these artists art telling us "this is how we view the world and express ourselves through art. This is what is important to us as members of Japanese culture."

I want to next explore the "others" that Sawaragi says visualize Japan for the rest of the world, this time exploring Japan's "infantile" culture, as a result of the *kawaii* culture that took hold in the 80s and 90s. According to Midori Matsui in her essay, *Beyond the Pleasure Room to a Chaotic Street: Transformations of Cute Subculture in the Art of the Japanese 90s*, "Japanese art in the 1990s made creative use of cute images and subcultures instead of succumbing to their soft seduction, turning their marginality, infantility, and incongruity into the resources of new artistic production."(Murakami 210) This quote comes after Matsui discusses the "marginality" and "infantility" of cute culture and its negative side effects on society. Using Eiji Otsuka's books *folklore of Young Girls* and *The "cute" Emperor of Young Girls* as reference material, Matsui claims that the cute culture started in the 1970s with characters like Hello Kitty created by Sanrio co. targeting *shojo* or young adolescent girls who for the first time had rooms all to themselves and not shared with other family members. These rooms became little sanctuaries for them, where they associated with all of the *kawaii* or "cute" things they surround-

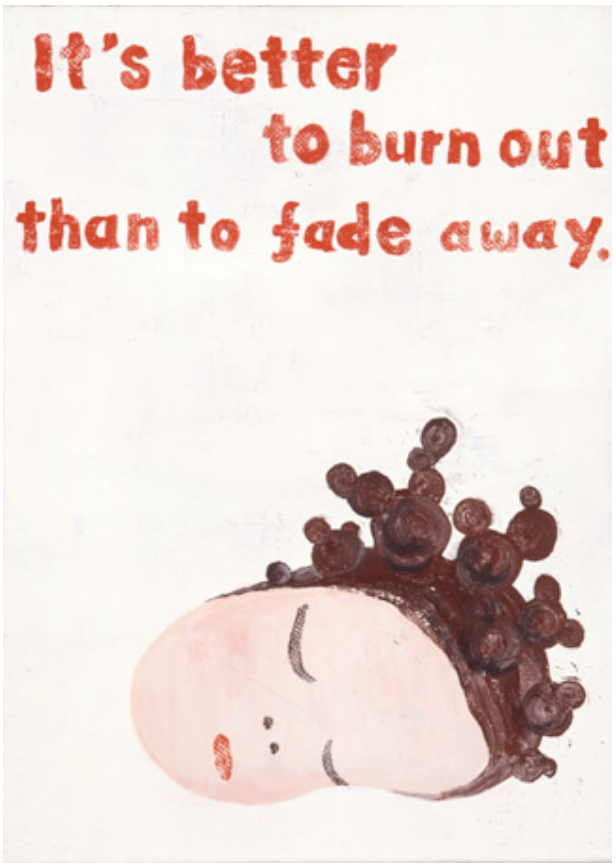
ed themselves with. This “cute, innocent I” self-image is what lead to the “...narcissistic structure of interdependency that connects Japanese consumer culture with imperialism. I would like to discuss three of the artists Matsui that says positively integrated “Japanese ‘infantile’ subculture into an art movement for the invention of new artistic expression.” In other words, these artists did not simply recreate the cute, bubbly imagery that surrounded them, but instead used it to create work that caused viewers to reflect on themselves and the society in which they live.

Yoshitomo Nara is one of these artists, who has made such a deep connection with many of his Japanese fans treat him like a rock star, which happens to be very rare for artists in Japan.(Murakami 61) Nara was born in 1959 in northern Hirosaki, northern Aomori prefecture, Japan. He earned his masters degree of fine arts at Aichi Prefectural University of Fine Arts and Music in 1987 and went on to study at Germany's Kunstakademie Dusseldorf from 1988-93. From then on he lived in Cologne until returning to Japan in 2000. Nara first emerged on the contemporary art scene in 1995 with his solo exhibition, *In the Deepest Puddle*. Nara paints images of children and sometimes animals like dogs in a very simple manner often without any background. His paintings are said to evoke feelings "that may coexist with innocence, such as sorrow, solitude, violence, aggression, cruelty, longing, and joy." Nara says that he was able to find these feelings within himself while living in Germany, where his language skills left him in virtual isolation. A good example of some of these stronger feelings would be one of the 1995 paintings that made Nara famous, *The Longest Night.* (to the right) In this painting you can see a little boy wearing very tall, wooden sandals and carrying a little, paper lantern to protect himself against



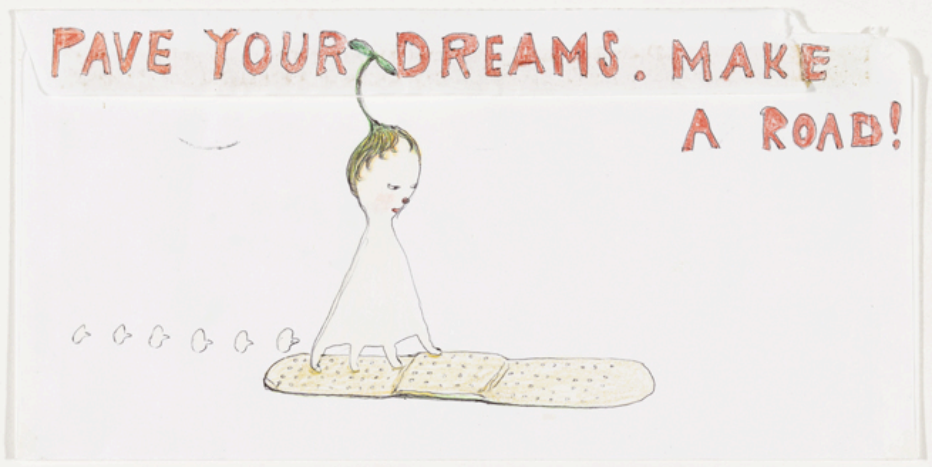
the purple darkness that surrounds him. I chose to show this painting because it exemplifies the idea I was discussing earlier about how some of the artists of the 90s managed to use cute culture to cause thoughtfulness and introspection. I believe many Japanese are able to empathize with the simple, cild-like innocence of this picture. Living in a heavily-populated, hierarchical, consumer-based society can leave one feeling cold and isolated. The irony lies in the fact that the *kawaii* industry is a influential contributor to this system.

Yoshitomo Nara had a recent exhibition from September 9, 2010 through January 2, 2011 at the Asian Society Museum in New York.(Asian Society) The exhibition was title "Nobody's Fool" and was split up into three thematic sections: Isolation, Rebellion and Music. It seems that the approach to the exhibition was to reveal the "feelings of helplessness and rage" and isolation felt in such an interconnected society because a large section of Nara's following sometimes misses this for the cute surfaces of the paintings, sculptures and now figurines that are available for purchase. It is in this sense that Nara has become very much like Murakami, where their art has also entered a highly commercialized form to the point where it is hard to separate the two.



According to the Asia Society, who put

on the exhibition, Nara was profoundly affected by the Ramones and other punk bands that come out of the 1970s. His “never forget the beginner’s spirit” rings true to the rebellious music of punk bands and also to the changes that Murakami wishes to bring about to art. *It’s better to burn out* was shown in the music section of the Nobody’s Fool exhibit. It is a good example of the rebelliousness of Nara against western standards of fine art while also exposing the large impact that western society has had on him as an artist. The words in the picture come from Neil Young’s son “my my hey hey,” which were borrowed by Kurt Cobain in his famous suicide note. I believe that this painting reveals Nara’s dedication to the western idea of the individual, while keeping to the relatively, anime/manga-like simplicity of the painting. Only the head of the girl is showing with her eyes closed as if she was sleeping.

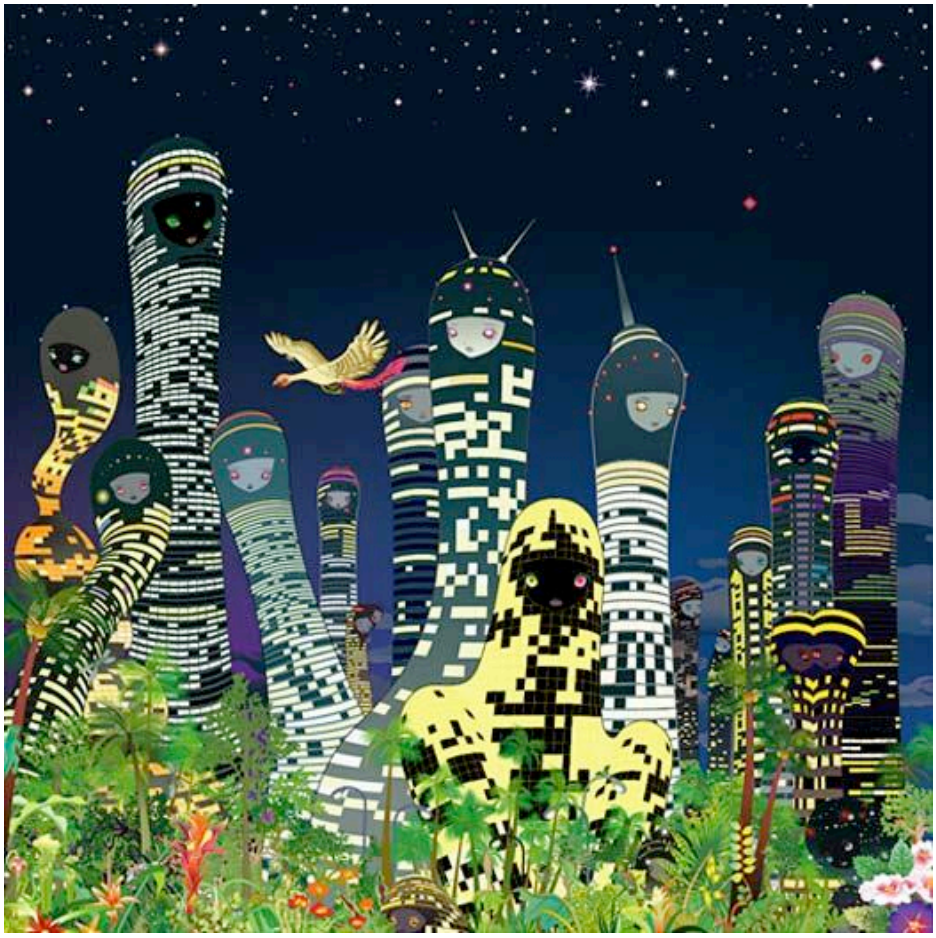


According to Nara he paints what he is not able to convey with words. The Asia Society excerpt on the Rebellion section puts it as “Nara himself describes his frustration of contemporary youth, particularly n Japan, as something that cannot be articulated in words because there is no clear-cut adversary.” Perhaps the picture *Pave Your Dreams, Make a Road!* presents the feelings of many other artists today. It may be time to break

away from the status quo that has held way in post-war Japan for so many years. It's okay to by into cute culture, but don't let it run your life.

The last two artists of my research are two female artists that both belong to Murakami's company *Kaikai Kiki*. According again to Midori Matsui, both Chiho Aoshima and Aya Takano, "brilliantly respond to Murakami's call, presenting unique visions of an imaginary future in original styles that reshape the visual influences of erotic animation, science-fiction comics, *ukiyo-e*, and other genres."(Murakami 230)

Chiho Aoshima was born in Tokyo, Japan in 1974 and never attended art school. She first discovered computer graphics in her senior year at Hosei University in Tokyo while studying Economics.(Murakami 52) She was initially drawn to computer design because of the flexibility it allowed to be creative and to render art in many different medias. She has made bags, dresses, murals, wallpaper, and prints hung like paintings. Her largest piece to date was in 2004 at the

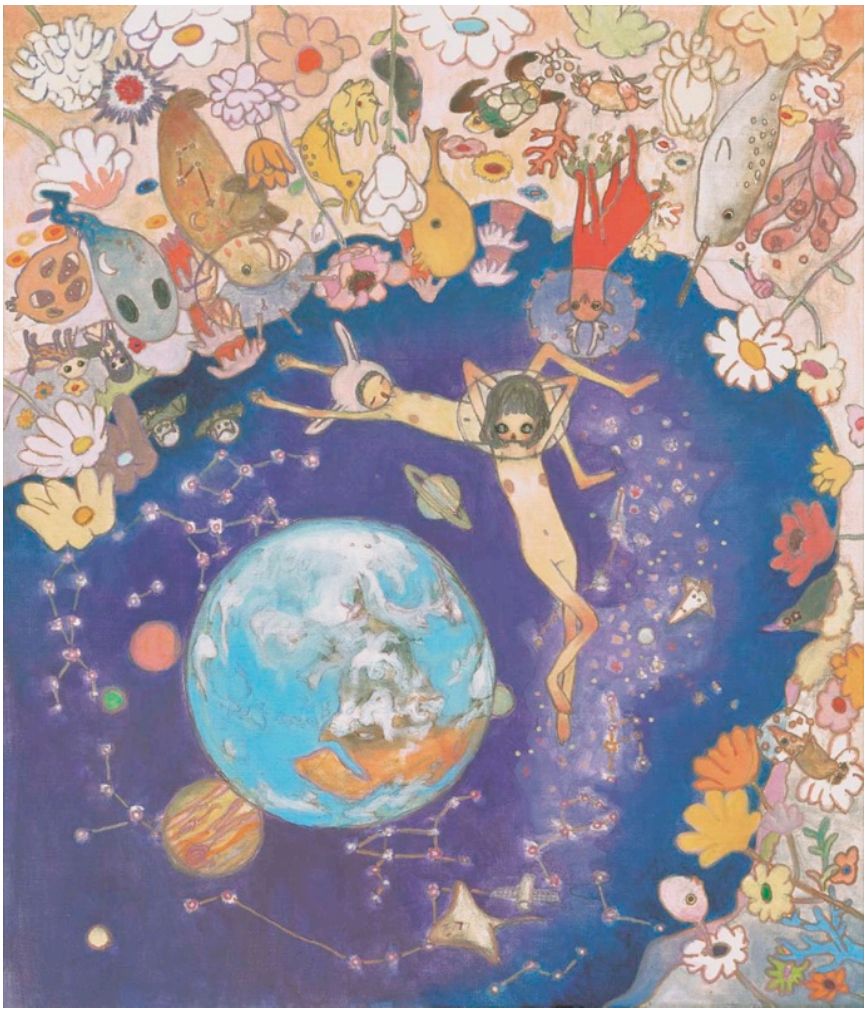


54th Carnegie International in Pittsburgh where she unveiled a wallpaper piece spanning 106 feet across by 15 feet in height.(kaikaikiki) Describing her art for her short bio on the *Kaikai Kiki* web site, she stated, “My work feels like strands of my thoughts that have flown around the universe before coming back to materialize.” When I first saw her work I could not help but agree with her description of her art. One piece can contain “beautiful and erotic worlds of ghosts, demons, schoolgirls, and exquisite natural landscapes” all made in bright, vivid colors with great attention to detail. One can stare at one of her larger creations for long periods of time and discover small details that they did not notice before. According to Matsui, Aoshima faithfully follows the Superflat style by, “the uneven distribution of spots of bright colors all over the pictorial field, and by exploiting the erotic titilation of *otaku* manga by showing her girls in the nude or in bondage.”(Murakami 231) Even though her art contains these naked girls, I don’t feel an erotic presence in her art. It’s as if the women in the art are staring at this spectacle along with the viewer, viewing not being viewed.

There is a theme found in her work that blends, nature, humans and technology together to form a futuristic utopia. *City Glow* Is a good example of this fusion of elements. It is night time in the painting and many stars are in the sky. In the foreground is a lush, tropical forest with many species of trees, bushes and flowers. In the background is a well-lit city full of bright multicolored skyscrapers. What makes this picture stand out so much is that the sky scrapers are alive. They all have the faces of women at their tops and bend this way and that as though they were mimicking the vegetation that surrounds them. They look as if they are in the process of moving around and interacting

like living beings. Matsuri calls it a "...mutation of *otaku* taste to suit her personal vision of Utopia, may be a way of practicing a "transgression of boundaries." Although the *otaku* element may not stand out as much in the work I chose to show, I believe Matsui is dead on in her analysis.

I was struck by how closely Aoshima's work reminds me of the article *The Utopian "Power to Live" The Significance of the Miyazaki Phenomenon* by Hiroshi Yamanaka. In the section on Miyazaki and Salvation, Yamanaka writes, "Miyazaki finds salvation based on the upon the immanent spiritual powers that infuse both human beings and the world, powers that work collaboratively, by uniting with each other, so that all can be saved. In this vision, all we have to do is to awaken the life-affirming spirit within ourselves, and to reach out to connect with those who have that same life affirming spirit." Although Aoshima sometimes depicts images of technology and human invention, it has always been at peace with nature. One can infer that this Neo-Pop artist



keeps true to some of her Japanese, shinto heritage while accepting the coming tides of the future. It is highly likely, being born in 1974, that Aoshima was influenced by works like *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* by Hayao Miyazaki.

Aya Takano takes this fusion of elements one step further in her paintings. Takano is an avid reader of the Science Fiction genre and her interpretations are said to be comparable to that of a specialist.(Murakami 72) Born in 1976, Takano studied art theory at Tama Art University where she graduated in 2000. Matsui claims that Takano creates futuristic fantastical worlds inspired by manga and European art while "Coyly taunting the 'Lolita complex' of an *otaku* erotic comic, she conveys a different sort of eroticism derived from the androgyny of the adolescent body."(Murakami 232) It is easy to see the lolita complex inspired art in the piece entitled *Earth* above. This painting is supposed represent the freedom of which the Aya yearns for.(Murakami 72) This artwork of course is seen as controversial in many places around the world but Takano has still managed to garner international fame. This may be because the author is female so one cannot assume the objectification of the girls in her paintings.

Looking back at these artists, it is hard to sum up Japanese contemporary art into a few words. Some of the artists look inwards at their own experiences to find inspiration for their art, while others looked outward at the world around them. Both types of artists use art to make sense of what they see. It is hard to say whether or not audiences really understand what they are trying to say. I can imagine that a large portion of Murakami's following is purely interested in the eye-gasm of colors and shapes that his art provides, while many try and understand what Superflat really is.

Superflat to me, is a lens with which one can view and try to understand contemporary Japanese society. I don't take what Murakami says for granted. I won't assume that he is the number one specialist on Japanese culture and should his words should be taken as truth. But, looking at the community of artists that he has surrounded himself with, I can't help but see a pattern of thought that seems distinctly "Japanese." I think anyone who has been influenced by the Japanese media, be it Godzilla, Astro Boy, Mobile Suit Gundam, or Hello Kitty, will see what I am trying to explain. I believe writing this paper has exposed me to a fascinating part of Japanese Pop Culture, and I hope to use it in my future experiences traveling abroad.

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