

FEARING THE WORST

Angst in new Japanese art.

By Peter Schjeldahl

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A detail from Yamaguchi Akira's "Narita International Airport." DETAIL: "NARITA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT: VIEW OF FLOURISHING NEW SOUTH WING" (2005) / COURTESY MIZUMA ART GALLERY

The art journalist Tetsuya Ozaki, writing in the catalogue for “Bye Bye Kitty!!!,” a show of new Japanese art, at the Japan Society, dubs that country’s youth of today the “floating generation,” who are reacting against “the collapse of the grand narrative and the failure of Japanese society to make its people happy.” He cites a crushing conformism in education and employment, falling rates of marriage and fertility, a soaring suicide count. The show’s curator, David Elliott, adds the ever-present dread of war and—more than justified, this month—of natural catastrophe. He writes, “In a densely urbanized, highly stratified society situated in the heart of an earthquake zone, the fear that the worst could easily happen lies at the back of many minds.” The earthquake and tsunami occurred on the day that I saw the show; it feels a little frivolous to be doing art criticism under the ongoing, terrible circumstances. But we will think of Japan a great deal in the coming days, and art, in its slow and indirect way, may serve as a catalyst for comprehension and a nourisher of feeling. Moreover, “Bye Bye Kitty!!!” is purposely informative about contemporary Japan.

The show’s title somewhat upstages the show itself, which gathers works by sixteen young or youngish artists and argues for a fresh trend in Japanese art. With some strong exceptions, the paintings, sculptures, photographs, videos, and installations are the standard fare of the global biennial circuit: a little specific and a lot generic, trailing scents of graduate art school. But there’s a tonic jolt of condensed wit in the punctuation of the show’s adieu to *kawaii*, or cuteness—the treachery export charm of big-eyed representations of kids and animals, which has not been limited to the unnervingly mouthless mien of Hello Kitty. *Kawaii* became a cynosure of high as well as popular Japanese art with the rise to fame, a decade ago, of the master of plastic-fantastic puerility, Takashi Murakami. (Sometimes hailed as Asia’s Andy Warhol, Murakami has made a fortune with happy- or demon-faced product lines in pictures and sculpture—the imagery veering between smiley flowers and atom-bomb clouds—and with designs for Louis Vuitton.) The title’s exclamation points track an insecure teen’s clamor for attention, on an

intensifying scale: emphasis, overkill, hysteria. “Bye Bye Kitty!!!” bookends a highly influential 2005 show at the Japan Society, whose title, “Little Boy,” related a generation of anime- and manga-besotted *otaku* (geeks) to the code name of the Hiroshima bomb. Curated by Murakami, “Little Boy” posited infantilism as the legacy, in Japan, of military disaster and a subsequent servitude to business and industry. Far from complaining, that show celebrated a grand wallow in impotent alienation, shadowed by unlovely kinks: sadomasochism, misogyny, pedophilia. “Bye Bye Kitty!!!” signals a collective will to grow up, if just a bit, with a general revival of traditional forms and techniques, and some acute social criticism.

The most prepossessing of the artists is one of the oldest, at forty-six, and the single raunchiest: Makoto Aida, whose forte, Elliott writes, is “sardonic social critique underlain by forthright nihilism and anger.” Aida commands archaic styles and compensates for their exhausted force with topical outrageousness. He may be remembered, grimly, for his contribution to the Whitney Museum’s “The American Effect,” in 2003, which sampled foreign responses to the United States: a vast painting, from 1996, of Manhattan in flames, being bombed by Second World War-era Japanese planes. Aida will win few friends, now, with “Harakiri School Girls” (2002), a colorful print, on a silvery holographic ground, of pretty lasses, with samurai swords, calmly disembowelling and beheading themselves. Then, there’s “Ash Color Mountains” (2009-10), a swimmingly misty acrylic painting, twenty-three feet long by nearly ten feet high, of hundreds of heaped corpses of salarymen, Japan’s white-collar drones, whom Aida evidently dislikes. (He snugs a Waldo and a Wall-E into the picture, for idle fun.) The show omits an Aida painting, which is represented in the excellent catalogue, of a schoolgirl, her clothes in disarray, sprawled across a miniature suburban townscape, being penetrated by a sea monster. The image refers to a breathtaking classic of Japanese erotica, Hokusai’s woodcut “The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife” (1814)—a woman sumptuously pleased by two octopuses. If art that knits the flashing present to the deep past is major,

Aida is a major artist, who, by the by, solicits us to loathe him.

Ukiyo-e, the historical Japanese art of woodcut illustration, exceeds its equivalent medium in every other culture for decorative beauty in balance with story-telling snap. A decisive influence on Western modern art since Whistler and van Gogh, it resurfaces in the dazzling styles of Yamaguchi Akira and, especially, Manabu Ikeda. Akira is a humorist. His pen-and-watercolor drawing “Narita International Airport: Various Curious Scenes of Airplanes” (2005) features cutaway views of circling airliners whose passengers enjoy gardens, hot tubs, a pool parlor, a chandeliered tearoom, and a library. The delicacy of the rendering far outstrips the requirements of the jokes. Ikeda is a visionary. His large drawings in acrylic paint, applied with pens, describe masses of organic life, castle architecture, and a city, all in infinitesimal detail. The city, in “Ark” (2005), is a towering congeries of buildings and streets, which gushes white water in streams and cataracts into a turbulent sea. It would take you hours to explore thoroughly, and then you’d have to start over, to refresh your memory. Does this sound like a stunt? It’s an enchantment.

Japan has lent itself to stubborn caricature. Elliott quotes Yum-Yum, in “The Mikado,” wondering, “in my artless Japanese way, why it is that I am so much more attractive than anybody else in the whole world,” and the postwar viceroy General Douglas MacArthur characterizing the Japanese as “a boy of twelve as compared with our development of forty-five years.” Such impressions consort strangely with the matchless subtlety of Japanese arts, crafts, religion, manners, and cuisine, which make Western ways seem gross by comparison. The great artist of criticism Roland Barthes, in his book “Empire of Signs,” recommended observing Japan in a touristic spirit of glad despair, savoring the Zen of endless artifice that feels urgently meaningful while revealing nothing definite. However, it seems, from “Bye Bye Kitty!!!,” that some younger Japanese are not content with proliferating elusive signs.

Two of the most interesting artists, the conceptual photographer Miwa

Yanagi and the painter Tomoko Kashiki, belong to a long-suffering class in Japanese society: women. Gorgeous, staged photographs from Yanagi's series "My Grandmothers" (2002-09) project the fantasies and the fears of young women, whom she interviewed, about their fates fifty years hence, imagining themselves as a soignée television executive, a ravaged and melancholy restaurant musician, and (with one woman in a montage of impersonations) a quartet of decrepit, laughing geishas. None of them fancy the national ideal of a happy matriarch. Kashiki paints sinuously distorted female characters anxiously at odds with beautifully generalized natural settings and interiors. One willowy girl wavers on the parapet of a building against a landscape of a highway, lakes, and wooded mountains. Imagine a breezy, beige-and-gray Francis Bacon. Kashiki is an artist of personal, exquisite unease. As such, she stands out from a cultural fabric that tends to repress individuality.

We used to regard Japan with worried fascination, as the destined usurper of American economic primacy. China has taken over that role, and its art, though as yet lacking a Murakami to emblemize its global influence, exudes something very like imperial afflatus. The uncertain mood of "Bye Bye Kitty!!!" suggests an onerous but maturing attitude of resignation. Viewing the show, I had a sense of it as an instant time capsule, of a summary statement overtaken by disastrous events. It's well worth seeing for that reason. It affords a baseline measure for changes that will soon unfold. ♦

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