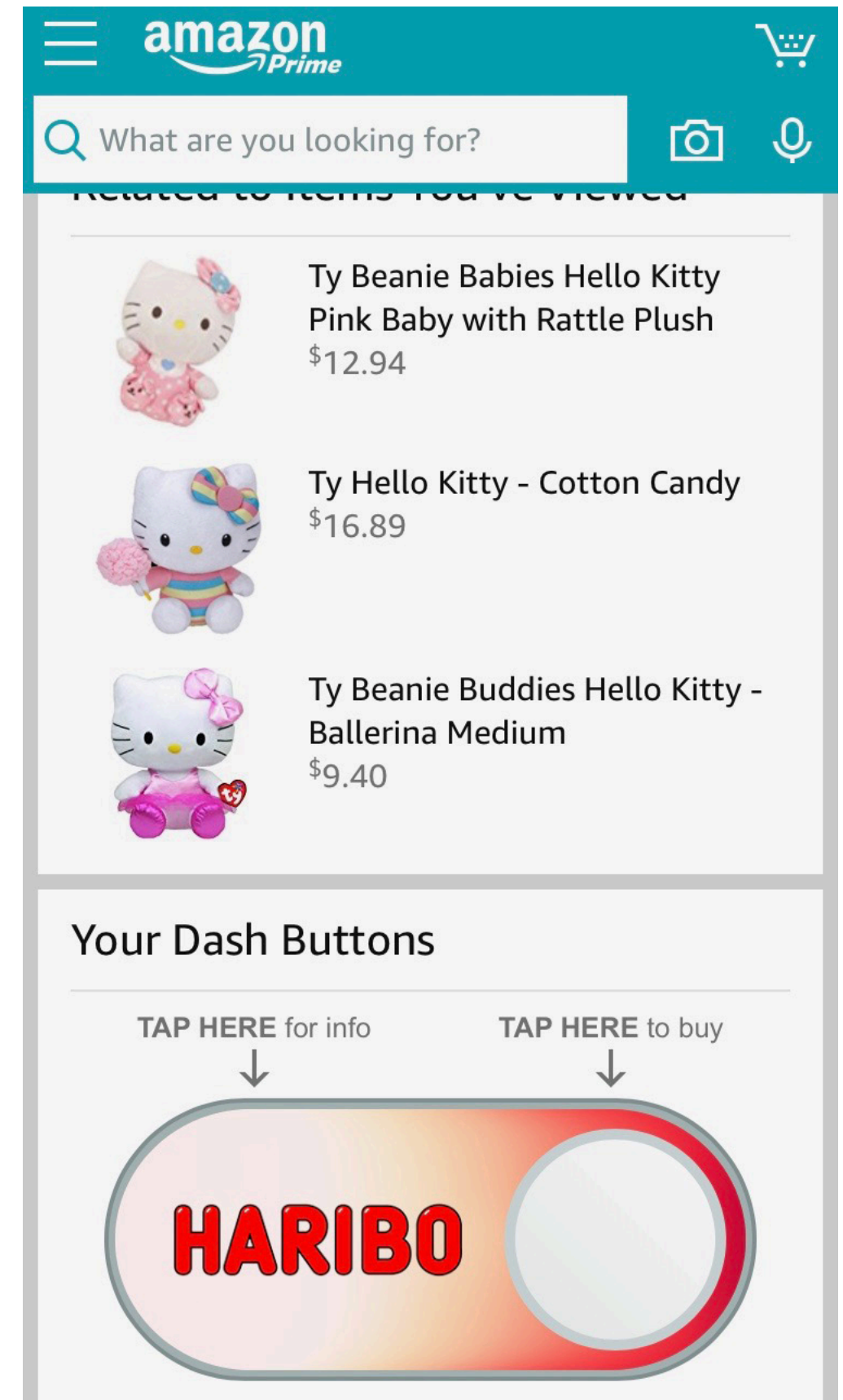


No

Added Sugar



A neon-lit street in Tokyo.  
Sanrio shop window.  
Dazzling displays of Hello Kitty, My Melody and Little Twin Stars.  
Emi (dressed in high school uniform, the skirt is very short) walks by and turns her head.  
EMI (transfixed):  
Kawaii!  
She rushes into the store.

End of Scene.



**Fig. 1.**  
Hayao Miyazaki  
*Howl's Moving Castle*

## No Added Sugar

### In the Quagmire of Kawaii

Since the end of World War II popularity of manga and anime have ballooned in Japan, contributing to the development of kawaii (cute) characters and kawaii culture. This phenomenon is not unique to Japan and is spreading across the globe at an alarming rate. I know for a fact that a Sanrio shop exists in the Detroit Wayne County airport. While we are enthralled by the plethora of lovable, large eyed personas, we rarely pause to contemplate what lies beneath the surface of their saccharine sweet appearance. The outcome is an escapist fantasy that creates an increasingly flattened, or as Takashi Murakami declared, a “superflat” value system, which pertains to society, customs, art and of course, culture.<sup>1</sup> Although it is recognized that kawaii is not a stand-alone occurrence among the Japanese, this essay attempts to reveal that kawaii actually sugarcoats numerous kowai(scary/creepy) issues that are specific to post-war Japan: infantilisation, materialism, objectification of women, deviant sexual desires, to name a few; and these matters are closely tied to Japan’s ambivalent and complex history.

The Japanese troops dominated the battlefields of Asia until two hydrogen bombs, nicknamed “Little Boy” and “Fat Man” was dropped respectively on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the US in 1945. Their landing instantly transformed Japan’s role from the victimizer to the victimized and continues to impact Japan’s social construct today. Fear of the relentless consequences of bombing has led the nation towards a preoccupation with anti-aging and science, as well as the consolidation of an introverted lethargy inherited from traditional values. All are reflected in manga and anime production such as Osamu Tezuka’s *Astroboy* and Hayao Miyazaki’s *Howl’s Moving Castle*. Out of these influences grew the otaku subculture. Otaku in Japanese is a slightly derogatory term that refers to a group of people (especially men) who disengage themselves from the social environment and who are usually obsessed with anime, manga and video games. Translated literally, otaku means “your home”, and was commonly used by housewives gossiping about other households.<sup>2</sup> One can imagine a grown-up man who refuses to step outside and spends the entire day in front of a screen, all the while gaining weight and listening to his mother’s complaints.



**Fig. 2.**  
Osamu Tezuka  
*Astro Boy*



**Fig. 3.**  
Takeshi and Yoshimi from *DiGiCharat*, who are otaku.





**Fig. 4.**  
Takashi Murakami  
*Hiropon*  
1997  
paint, fiberglass and iron  
88 x 41 x 48 in. (223.5 x 104 x 122 cm)



**Fig. 5.**  
Takashi Murakami  
*My Lonesome Cowboy*  
1998  
oil, acrylic, fiberglass and iron  
100 x 46 x 36 in. (254 x 116.8 x 91 cm)

Contemporary otaku have entered the mainstream and no longer attract so much social disdain, however it has not been forgotten that “otaku” used to be almost interchangeable with the pejoratives “little boy” and “fat man”. Interestingly, otaku share striking similarities with hippies in the west: both are sentimental and idealistic individuals who are keen in searching for the self, peace and happiness.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the artworks included in this discussion emerge from the world of otaku – take a look at *Hiropon*. With a jovial face, slender body, elongated legs and oversized breasts, *Hiropon* replicates the small plastic bishojo (beautiful young girl) figures marketed towards avid fans by manga and anime companies – she is supposed to be every otaku’s dream girl. However, the bikini that barely covers only serves to emphasize the monstrosity of the breasts – the erect nipples become indistinguishable from penises, shooting milk/semen boldly at the audience. Her larger-than-life scale makes the experience even more bizarre. *Hiropon*’s male counterpart, *My Lonesome Cowboy* showcases his sexual potency on an equal if not more freakish level. He sports his gravity-defying ejaculation like a cowboy’s lasso that is about to capture the viewer. His posture and hair resemble that of characters from the anime series *Dragon Ball*. These references to popular culture place the otaku at the “loci of exchange between intense eros and consciousness”, and directly counters the image of the humble and polite Japanese man.<sup>4</sup> *My Lonesome Cowboy* also draws attention to the lack of hypersexualized male bodies in manga and anime, subjecting the figure to the scrutiny of female gaze. Both *Hiropon* and *My Lonesome Cowboy* address complications of fetish and materialism at the heart of otaku culture. When the object of desire ceases to exist in the virtual, the fantasy quickly spills into a nightmare.

It may be unexpected to compare the paintings of Chinatsu Ban with Murakami’s plastic sculptures, since Ban’s work mimics the innocent and playful drawings of a child. Ban lures us into the realm of the sexual under the guise of tender sweetness, although she is less concerned with the material world. In fact, Ban holds strong Shinto beliefs which celebrate the mysterious powers in nature. She claims that elephants are her talismans, which to some extent accounts for the recurring elephants in her paintings, but she is also interested in the elephant trunks’ phallic nature.<sup>5</sup> The elephants perform mischievous activities that suggest a childish sexual impulse. In *So-zo Pregnant, So-zo Giving Birth* the mother



**Fig. 6.**  
Chinatsu Ban  
*So-zo Pregnant, So-zo Giving Birth*  
2004  
acrylic on canvas  
197 x 291 cm



**Fig. 7.**  
Chinatsu Ban  
*Happy Birthday*  
2003  
acrylic on canvas  
194 x 259 cm



**Fig. 8.**  
Chinatsu Ban  
*Elephant Softcream Lick*  
2002  
acrylic on panel and Japanese paper  
65 x 53 cm



**Fig. 9.**  
Chinatsu Ban  
*Twin Mount Fuji*  
2004  
acrylic on canvas  
130.3 x 162 cm



**Fig. 10.**  
A traditional fundoshi



**Fig. 11.**  
Chinatsu Ban  
*Elephant Tower Lick*  
2002  
acrylic on panel and Japanese paper  
65 x 53 cm



elephant gives birth by blowing out bubbles out of her trunk, giving the baby elephants a light and airy quality which is also present in other paintings. What's more odd is that all the elephants, including So-zo, are wearing underpants or nappies. Occasionally apples sneak into the paintings, hinting at a kind of sexual awakening. The proliferation of panties can also be read as a sign of shameful impotence, since the traditional fundoshi (undergarment for adult males) was quickly replaced by western style underpants after WWII. Nevertheless, images of elephants licking ice cream gravitate towards libidinal gratification, and this is especially obvious in *Elephant Tower Lick*, in which the euphoric expressions on both parties demonstrate mutual orgasm. In *Twin Mount Fuji*, Ban even has the little girls reach into their underpants. The artist shoots a sugarcoated bullet through sexual desire and repression, as well as the assumed innocence of the young.

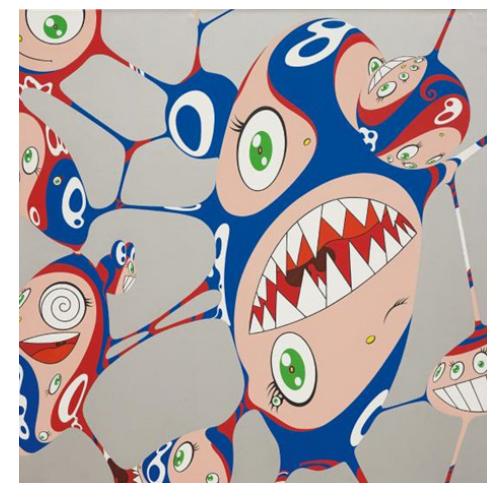
Murakami's invention, DOB, likewise ascribes to the child-like. *DOB in the Strange Forest* places him in a perilous situation enclosed by mushrooms covered in eyes, DOB seems to plea: "don't come near me!" It is precisely this defenseless state that draws our sympathy towards DOB and reinforces his cuteness, since the the classical usage of "kawaii" signify "pathetic", which becomes equivalent to "kawaiso" (pitiful).<sup>6</sup> The fungi are abundant in allusions and meaning, the most direct one being the mushroom cloud, others are phallus, rapid propagation, hallucinogenic properties and *Alice in Wonderland*.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the staring eyes are



**Fig. 12.**  
Takashi Murakami  
*DOB in the Strange Forest*  
1999  
fiber-reinforced plastic, resin, fiberglass,  
acrylic and iron  
60 x 152 x 137 in.

reminders of George Orwell's *1984*, DOB hence becomes the vulnerable "little boy" under constant surveillance of its American "big brother". The eyes are a motif that reappear in *Chaos*, a series of paintings that Murakami made from 1998 to 1999. When observed individually they still retain a typical cute manga style, however when juxtaposed with sharp teeth and extreme distortion, they turn into a menacing stare. DOB is dismembered and then reconstructed like Frankenstein's creation. Whilst Mary Shelley's monster undergoes the transformation from kowai to kawaii, the condition reverses for DOB. The paintings are brimming with an energy akin to the speedy reproduction of mushrooms and viruses, giving the impression that they can no longer be contained within the frame and is approaching an explosion.

DOB's existence not only implicate Kawaii as an exploitation of the infantile tendency in Japan, but also an exploitation of the general consumer. Since his debut in 1993, DOB has been made into stuffed toys, keychains, T-shirts, the list goes on. As Amada Crug writes, "DOB does not promote any product, except perhaps Murakami. DOB is a disengaged signifier, an ever-changing symbol of all the other artificially constructed characters that sell merchandise."<sup>8</sup> Murakami's uncritical attitude regarding capitalism reflects the enthusiastic embrace of the American economic system in Japan, meanwhile an anti-capitalist sentiment continues to serge within the U.S..<sup>9</sup> Murakami also sees little distinction between his art and merchandise, which has been a common Japanese



**Fig. 13 & 14**  
Takashi Murakami  
*Chaos*  
1998  
acrylic on canvas, mounted on board  
15.9 x 15.9 in (40.3 x 40.3 cm)



**Fig. 15.**  
Takashi Murakami x Louis Vuitton  
*Eye Need You, Eye Love You, Eye Miss You & Eye Dare You*  
2002-



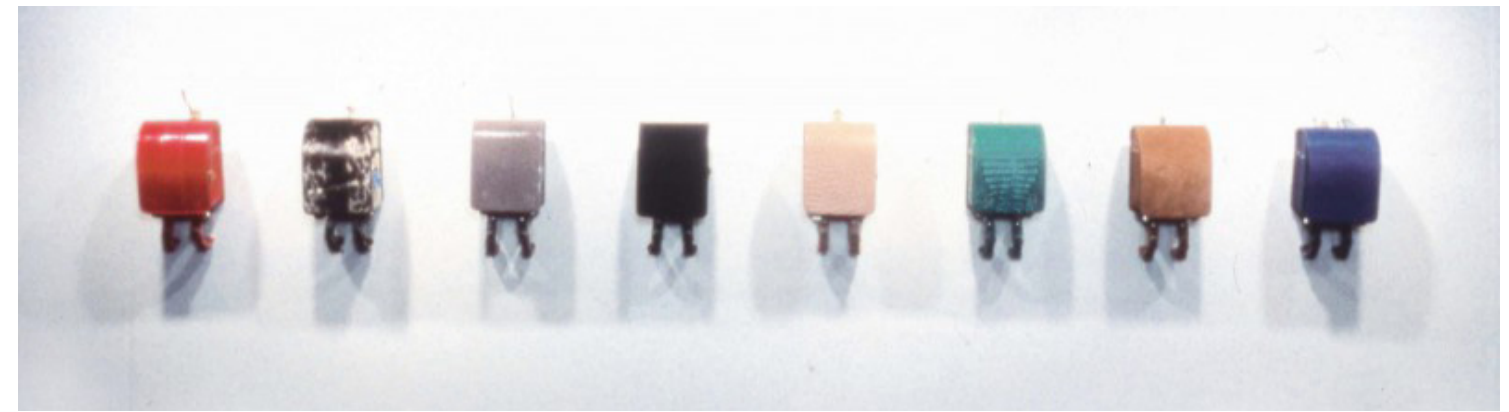
**Fig. 16.**  
Takashi Murakami x Louis Vuitton  
2002-



**Fig. 17.**  
Takashi Murakami x Louis Vuitton  
2002-

conception until the 1890s, when Meiji Japan opened its doors to the west and assimilated to the occidental idea of division between fine and decorative art.<sup>10</sup> Their open stance towards the marketplace has won Murakami and his contemporaries the term “New Pop” in the 1990s, also known as “Neo Pop” or “Tokyo Pop”, which shares certain principal philosophies with Dada and Pop art. To quote Margrit Brehm, “Warhol made the brave new world of commodities worthy of being depicted... The works of New Pop too, are developed from the culture of a mass of society, but here the focus is no longer on adapting the existing images but on inventing new images which function just like the media images. It is no longer a case of transforming everyday aesthetics into art - this phase is long since over - but of clearly showing that both realms draw from the same pool of images and - at least potentially - have the same target group.”<sup>11</sup>

The target group here consists mostly of young women with disposable income thanks to Japan’s ever-expanding economy. Murakami’s collaboration with renowned luxury brand Louis Vuitton beginning in 2002 reiterates the dissolution of the hierarchy between high art and pop culture. Elements of eyes, flowers and pandas are collaged with the Louis Vuitton signature monogram, using existing images to generate a new kawaii image. In combination with bows and bag titles such as *Eye Love You*, they are particularly appealing to the female eye. As some suspect that Murakami may be discounting the implications of kawaii in order to



**Fig. 18.**  
Takashi Murakami  
*Randoseru Project*  
1991  
Children’s backpacks in various animal skins (cobra, seal, whale, ostrich, caiman, hippopotamus and shark)  
12 x 9 x 8 in. (30 x 23 x 20 cm) each

advertise himself as a brand, Baudrillard offers a different perspective on the position of art in the face of commercialization – the only way out was for it to “become more mercantile than merchandise itself”.<sup>12</sup>

Murakami’s *Randoseru Project* falls in line with Baudrillard’s description. The Randoseru is a leather backpack worn by Japanese pupils which simultaneously epitomizes their cuteness and signals a bright outlook. It originated in the Dutch Army’s fabric backpack called “ransel”, and was adopted and modified by the Japanese military during the late 19th century, followed by their distribution among elementary school children to encourage the spirit of national defense.<sup>13</sup> The eight backpacks in *Randoseru Project* are made from rare animal skins. Several of these species face extinction, which recalls the consumption of luxury leather goods in Japan heedless of the environment. The country’s notorious oblivion of endangered animals is reflected in its much delayed compliance to the *Washington Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species*, which ironically prevented the inclusion of the artwork in Murakami’s exhibition *The Meaning of the Nonsense of the Meaning*, as its importation across national borders would have violated the convention.<sup>14</sup> *Randoseru Project* encompasses sombre subjects such as militarism, nationalism and environmentalism, literally “putting one of world’s greatest problems on the backs of Japan’s children”.<sup>15</sup> Shinji Ikari, the teenage protagonist in the anime *Neon Genesis: Evangelion*, is placed in the exact same dilemma. He is forced to battle creatures called



**Fig. 19 & 20.**  
Detail shots of *Randoseru Project*





Fig. 21.  
Shinji Ikari in *Neon Genesis: Evangelion*



Fig. 22.  
Ai Yamaguchi  
*tsuki wa kakureru* (18)  
2011-2012  
acrylic on cotton, blanket and panel  
40 9/10 × 40 1/5 × 2 2/5 in



Fig. 23.  
Ai Yamaguchi  
*Ichi to Two*  
2013  
acrylic on cotton, blanket and panel  
6 1/2 × 9 2/5 × 2 in

“angels” in order to ensure a future for humanity, but feels incompetent to handle such adult responsibility. Shinji is the opposite of a hero, his emotional struggle renders him the helpless “little boy”, which parallels the position of Japan, a nation grounded in self-deprecation and doubt. *Neon Genesis* paints a bleak prospect for the young in contrast to the suggestion of biblical salvation in its title; the fact that Shinji is fighting angels prompts the audience to question if humanity is the true monster.

Murakami and Ban expose the flipside of kawaii, yet there are a number of artists, such as Ai Yamaguchi and Aya Takano who employ kawaii imagery to reinforce femininity. Both artists portray nude young girls against the objectification of the female body, and both evoke the sensibility of ukiyo-e (a genre of Japanese art which flourished during Edo period), which literally translates to “pictures of the floating world”. Yamaguchi’s depiction of flesh is sensual rather than erotic – the artist delicately omits the reproductive organs (an antithesis to *Hiropon* and *My Lonesome Cowboy*), and conveys the suppleness of the body through fluid outlines and flat planes of color, which is reminiscent of ukiyo-e techniques. Teen prostitution is a sensitive topic in Japan, nonetheless Yamaguchi is not shy to admit that her subjects are young prostitutes.<sup>16</sup> Her bishojo possess a defiant gaze comparable to that of Yoshitomo Nara’s aggressive children. What’s more, their enlarged translucent emerald eyes resemble that of snakes. In Asian folklore snakes who have lived for hundreds of years often has the ability to transform into a beautiful women, who tempt men and then devour them. Perhaps the artist is suggesting that young girls can avoid being victims of kawaii culture by empowering themselves. The analogy to snakes is most apparent in *Ichi to Two*, where the the pattern is evident of snake skin, and the composition and posture of the two bodies allude to the metamorphosis from serpent to woman.

Apart from traditional Japanese art and myths, Yamaguchi also draws inspiration from literature. The organic shapes of her canvases are a derivative of deconstructed Japanese hiragana characters, ones that the artist is not so fond of in terms of pronunciation and meaning.<sup>17</sup> Hiragana was practiced exclusively by ladies of the royal court in the Heian period, and thus deemed a feminine manner of calligraphy.<sup>18</sup> The Japanese characters are supposed to be written vertically, and joins together to become amorphous, which corresponds to the mingling of hair and body in Yamaguchi’s paintings.<sup>19</sup> In many Asian cultures hair is imbued with the

significance of beauty and memory. In *haru demo ak demo nai fuyu*, the hair flows freely into inky streams, a pile of hair clips lie on the floor, and a strand of hair wraps around a young prostitute’s thigh in a snake-like fashion. The scene elaborates a narrative of self-liberation and unbashful display of feminine charm. The artist also enjoys taking apart poems to form new verses. Her 2014 exhibition titled “Shinchishirin” translates to “heart, earth, words, forest”, which expresses her wish to plant seeds of our heart in the ground to grow a forest of poetry.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the canvases have a ceramic quality, due to Yamaguchi’s unique process: she first wraps the wood panel in a blanket or futon, and subsequently covers it with another layer of cotton fabric, which serves as the base for gessoing.<sup>21</sup> This method enhances the flat, saturated quality of the images that is also usually associated with ukiyo-e.



Fig. 24.  
Ai Yamaguchi  
*haru demo ak demo nai fuyu*  
2014  
acrylic on cotton, blanket and panel  
72 4/5 × 44 9/10 × 2 2/5 in



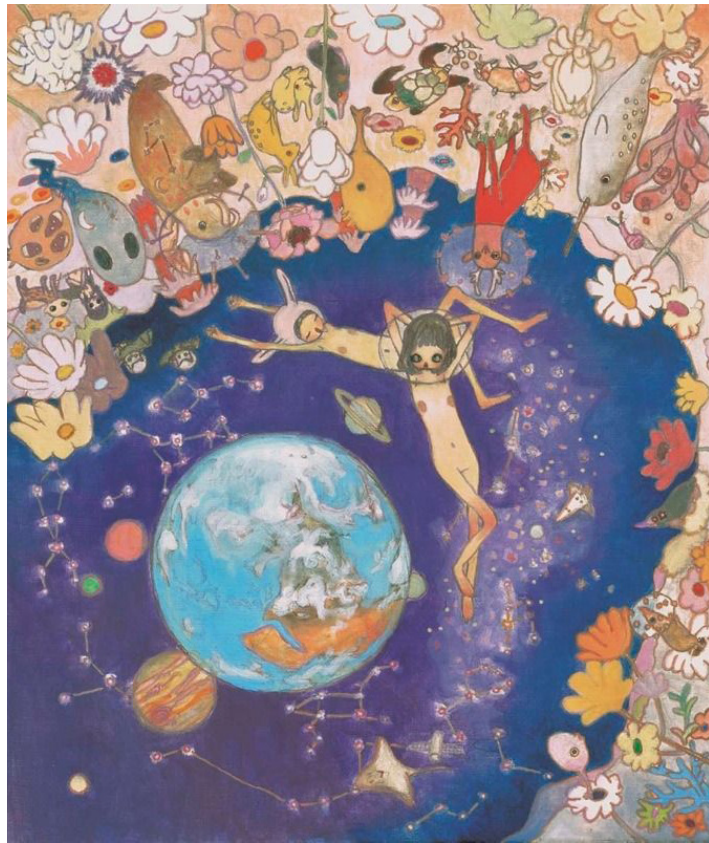


Fig. 25.  
Aya Takano  
*Earth*  
2004  
acrylic on canvas  
20 3/4 x 18 in



Fig. 26.  
Aya Takano  
*Noshi and Megu, On Earth, Year 2036*  
2002  
acrylic on canvas  
35 3/4 x 29 in



Fig. 27.  
Aya Takano  
*A Night in Ueno, 50th Year of the Showa*  
2004  
acrylic on canvas  
6.6 x 7.6 feet



Fig. 28.  
Katsuhiro Otomo  
from *Akira*  
1982-1990

Whereas Yamaguchi's work alludes to the past, Aya Takano is more invested in the future. Takano's love for science fiction is discernable – planets, hybrid creatures and girls hovering in mid-air frequent the canvas. These elements inhabiting the picture plane reinvent ukiyo-e word for word. Many of the narratives unfold at night: neon signs, concrete buildings and chain stores are reminiscent of cyberpunk films such as *Blade Runner*, which indicate clues that the girls are cyborgs, even though they lack robotic body parts. There is a subdued anxiety towards genetic and technological fusion, a futuristic nostalgia mirroring the moral concerns of manga master Osamu Tezuka, who Takano admires.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless Takano's method of storytelling has more in common with Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* than Tezuka's works. Tezuka's manga is semiotically structured, influenced by Disney animations, his frames progress like film shots, with characters acting as signifiers to guide narrative.<sup>23</sup> Otomo rejected this approach by drawing each frame as a singular image and allowing the characters to cement the construction of their realm.<sup>24</sup> What's more, Otomo uses manga to critique manga, striving to devise a "meta-manga".<sup>25</sup> The same can be said about Takano. A common theme pervades her body of work, but each painting can be read as an individual narrative. Takano also taunts otaku lust by subverting eroticism from that culture. Otaku with Lolita complex long for the erotic prepubescent naked body, which Takano tries to evade.<sup>26</sup> Her nudes are slim, slightly disproportionate and almost androgynous, the flesh is not luscious and loses most of its sexual appeal.



Fig. 29.  
Osamu Tezuka  
from *New Treasure Island*  
1947



**Fig. 30.**  
Aya Takano  
*Regeneration of Ocean Flowers*  
2015  
oil on canvas  
51 1/5 × 63 4/5 in



On the other hand, Takano's world parallels the introverted and evasive characteristics of otaku. It resides somewhere in-between reality and hallucination, the physical and the virtual. The artist confesses that until the age of nineteen she considered everything she read to be true.<sup>27</sup> Her paintings operate in the same fashion as a girl's bedroom, a private sanctuary where no necessary separation from the fantastical to the real has to be maintained. The bedroom is also where a girl projects the self-image of the "cute, innocent I" that is also pitiful.<sup>28</sup> Social critic Eiji Otsuka argued: "This absence of otherness in the closed circuit of the adolescent ego nurtures the structure of dependency that dissolves the responsibility of individuals."<sup>29</sup> Indeed Takano's adolescent girls are never alone, surrounded by other girls, animals, plants, architecture and planets, together they form an ecosystem in which everyone is interdependent. At the same time, their vacant, sluggish eyes suggest their consciousness still lingers in secluded dreams.

Takano's most recent works demonstrate a fascination with water, though clues to the aquatic were always present. Some of the groundless figures appear to be floating in water; her broken, less refined lines suggest bodies submerged in liquid; and their oblong eyes resemble those of sea creatures.<sup>30</sup> In *Regeneration of Ocean Flowers* and *In the Midst of Fertility*, blue haired girls are enclosed by schools of fish, referencing birth and water as a symbol of femininity. Once again the teens are suspended in a pre-fertile state, reflecting the infantile mentality of otaku, perhaps even



**Fig. 31.**  
Aya Takano  
*In the Midst of Fertility*  
2015  
Oil on canvas  
39 2/5 × 39 2/5 in

expressing a subconscious desire to return to the amniotic sac.

The ambivalence of the word "kawaii", signifying both the "cute" and the "pathetic", defines Japan's present social values contrary to the notion of "wabi-sabi". The apparent simplicity and sweetness of the cute imagery undermines a great number of problems faced by post-colonial Japan. What kawaii prescribes as a placebo is the dismissal of maturity, individuality and nature, in addition to the embrace of consumerism, artificiality, interdependency and female objectification. To this day Japan embody the "little boy" who sinks deeper in the quagmire of kawaii in a floating and transient world. "Superflat" hence becomes a most appropriate description for a homogenous and flattened culture dominated by adolescent girls and otaku. Murakami and the New Pop generation manipulates kawaii as a response to those issues, sourcing traditional and pop components to reestablish an artistic sensibility unique to postmodern Japan, though as with all Japanese, their attitude towards kawaii is ambiguous.



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