

MR.: OUT OF BODY EXPERIENCE

PROFILE/SAITAMA

by Andrew Maerke

BORN MASAKATSU IWAMOTO IN 1969, JAPANESE artist Mr. borrowed his current moniker from Japan's Mr. Baseball, Shigeo Nagashima, who manned third base for Tokyo's Yomiuri Giants from 1958 to 1974. However, Mr. is more modest than his charismatic sports counterpart. Shy and reticent, Mr. speaks about his work in short assertive phrases rather than theoretical pronouncements. Right now he is preparing for his first solo show at New York's Lehmann Maupin Gallery in May. Along one wall of his studio—a former warehouse in the Tokyo suburb of Saitama—rests a gigantic four-panel painting of pre-teen girls sprinting gleefully through Tokyo's Akihabara district, originally a market for discount electronic goods and now notorious as ground zero for *otaku* “loser” subculture. Assistants work on smaller canvases depicting anime-style children standing in nondescript suburban landscapes, with precise details such as electric wires or laundry lines. Monumental sculptures of children's heads, still under production, sit like detritus from another galaxy in the far corner of the large, cluttered space, peaking out from behind metal frame shelves and art supplies. Mr.'s futon lies nearby.

Mr.'s fascination with children is an unabashed symptom of his

Lolita complex, or “lolicon” as it is referred to in Japanese. Anime and manga, considered adult entertainment in the fullest sense, with storylines following socio-political or environmental issues in addition to erotic themes, often feature children as protagonists. The idealized child and its inverse, a nostalgia for childhood, provide a powerful locus for escape from daily life. As such, Mr.'s art, which ranges from drawings, paintings, sculptures to performances, is a nervy exploration of his own desires and fantasies, as well as his own nonconformity, but its charm lies in its apparent lack of self-consciousness. Its provocativeness lies in a fixation upon the point where innocence and experience collide, the transition from egoless childhood to adult self-awareness.

Mr. grew up near Kobe in western Japan, although he mischievously lists the fictional town of Cupa as his birthplace. After failing—three times—to pass the entrance exam for Tokyo University of Art and Music, Mr. studied at Sokei Academy of Fine Art & Design in Tokyo, which has no entrance requirements. He broke into fine art when he was hired by Takashi Murakami (SEE AAP 34 & ALMANAC 2), who encouraged his experimentation with the Lolita imagery in anime classics such as Hayao Miyazaki's *Heidi* TV series (1974) and now popularized as its own genre, called *moe* or “sprouting bud.” Murakami, who has engineered opportunities for Mr. and other artists through his studio and talent agency Kaikai Kiki, will not be faraway in New York in May, opening his debut show with Gagosian Gallery uptown.

In early works, Mr. depicted innocent young girls and boys completely out of proportion to their surroundings. A lineup of girls in swimsuits might float mirage-like over Heidi's Alps, as in *Pipaluniryoraze* (1999), or they might be seen bathing, larger than life, in a lake, as in *Oh! Onsen Gegege* (2003). *WRC (World Rally Championship)* and *Gepi Gepi Saturday*, both from 2002, present young boys standing nude against an urban landscape and a beach scene, respectively. Viewed from below, they fill the foreground, assuming a heroic quality undermined by their immature bodies. Sculptural works include arrangements of disembodied, candy-color heads suspended from the ceiling like miniature totems, while larger heads are embellished with psychedelic details—landscapes and other scenes painted in the children's eyes, which Mr. says, “reflect everything—hope as well.”

In a telephone interview with *Art AsiaPacific*, Gen Watanabe, who worked as executive director of Kaikai Kiki in New York and is now director of Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Miami, which represents Mr., recalled visiting Tokyo dealer Tomio Koyama's booth at the Art Basel Miami Beach art fair in 2002, where *WRC* was on display: “When I first saw these paintings I burst into laughter. I thought, ‘What is he doing?’ It was outrageous. All these American women were looking at it and saying how cute and adorable it was.”

Watanabe continued, “Mr.'s a real geek. I don't know if that's why people appreciate his work or not. It's quite approachable. What is exciting is that although he's totally over the top, with each exhibition or project he pushes himself and breaks the mold. That's what makes him a great artist.”



■ Mr. Photo by Miget.



Mr. has also inserted himself into his own works, creating self-mocking scenarios that tickle the limits between fantasy and fetish. An untitled piece from 2003 has Mr. lying in bed, contemplating a pixie-proportioned girl in underwear sitting on his pillow. Another untitled work from 2003, included in Takashi Murakami's blockbuster "Little Boy" exhibition at New York's Japan Society Gallery in 2005 (SEE A.A.P. 46), has Mr. walking naked down a suburban street at night, accompanied by a young girl in a summer outfit. Perched on the tip of his erection is a pint-sized naked boy, arms extended for balance. Mr. looks down in surprise, as though shocked by his own sexuality.

And yet there is a sterile quality suffusing all these works, a sense that none of the situations Mr. envisions could exist beyond the virtual realm. Some of it has to do with otaku subculture, where sexual drive is often channeled through the consumption of figurines and fan merchandise rather than through physical interaction. Some of it has to do with the rhythms of daily life that return throughout his paintings, the prosaic and unremarkable patterns of suburbia. Mr. assured me, "It's meant to make viewers at ease."

In many ways Mr. is the quintessential otaku, living alone and working continuously on his art. For recreation he follows child idols such as Suenaga Haruka and Ueto Aya, or anime voice actors featured in specialty magazines and female volleyball players, who, he noted, are "impressive—they're tall, and they win and they cry." He takes

one or two days off each month and goes to Tokyo to buy books and magazines. In a second-story space above his studio, he keeps the spoils of these expeditions, which he shared with great excitement. When asked about the moral implications of such material, he replied that in Japan, morals are relatively casual, as long as one doesn't break the law. His work, he says simply, is about expressing himself.

Mr.'s work will be on view at Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York, from May 3 through June 23.



■ Mr. — *New Tokyo Ferry Terminal (Ariake 4-chome)* (2004-2005) FRP, acrylic, 1000 x 1470 x 1770 mm. Copyright 2004-2005 Mr./Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York. ■ Mr. — *Making Things Right* (2006) Acrylic on canvas, 3000 x 4500 x 70 mm. Copyright 2006 Mr./Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris & Miami.