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Art in Review

Mr.

Lehmann Maupin
540 West 26th Street, Chelsea
Through tomorrow

If the Whitney Museum's "Summer of Love" exhibition extended into the present, the work of the Japanese painter and sculptor who goes by the name Mr. might be included, albeit with a parental warning posted. Discovered by the impresario-artist Takashi Murakami, Mr. is a product of Japan's otaku or "cute" subculture, a mostly male domain obsessed with anime, manga and young adolescents.

Mr.'s terminally cute, denim-clad sculptured waifs resemble fourth-generation flower children, as well as Muffie dolls, the younger predecessors to Barbies. Their heads are enormous. Their chirpy smiles reveal bright pink tongues. Their plate-size eyes are hallucinatory worlds unto themselves, with rainbow-colored irises and dreamlike scenes.

The eyes have it, for me, along with the impeccable craft and scale and the intense Pop colors — all are at their best in this sculpture, which you can imagine working well in a children's playground. Nearly everything else alternates between treacle and creepiness.

His paintings could be storybook illustrations, sometimes for adults only. In "A Song I Heard a Long Time Ago," a naked little girl stands between the legs of a naked man who appears to have a self-portrait of Mr. tattooed on his buttock. The contrast between the bright figures and the drabber, more realistic background can have an interesting tension.

"Ah, Akihabara," a mural-size ode to the bustling Tokyo district that is the center of all things Otaku has an epic, cartoony density, with the main figures' inner anxieties depicted in thought balloons. The older, shifty Otaku men are clearly discernible, Mr. included.

The formal force of the work makes you wonder what kind of artist Mr. might be if he resolved some of his wildly apparent issues. Cute enough to eat alive is not an interesting aesthetic quality.

ROBERTA SMITH