



**The Protégés** • **Chinatsu Ban** and the hindquarters of her sculpture "V W X Yellow Elephant Underwear/H I J Kiddy Elephant Underwear" for Central Park. **Mahomi Kunikata** is so obsessed with eating that it seeps into every aspect of her art. **Masakatsu Iwamoto**, known as Mr., has a very otaku-like interest in young girls, as evidenced in his work in progress.

way too intellectual for his purpose. He wanted to become his own industry."

With his customary devotion to research, Murakami analyzed the principles of kawaii. "I found a system for what is a cute character," he said. On a whiteboard at Kaikai Kiki, he drew me a circle with the top half blank and the bottom half containing two dots for eyes and a smiling mouth. "In the kawaii system, this scale is very important," he said. Over the last decade, Murakami has released numerous cute characters: among them, Mr. Pointy, smiling flowers, colorful mushrooms and the good and bad toddlers Kaikai and Kiki. Emblematic of his reorientation from confrontation to cuteness, he changed the name of his studio in 2001 from the Hiropon Factory to Kaikai Kiki. He said he hopes to expand his audience by making animated films with his characters, and he has already opened a six-person animation facility in Tokyo and leased space in Los Angeles. (He plans to include an animated film in a midcareer retrospective of his work, to be held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2007.)

The apotheosis of kawaii culture is Hello Kitty, the big-eyed, beribboned, expressionless pussycat character that stokes a billion-dollar-a-year business for the Sanrio company. Created in 1974, the Kitty character took off in 1985, first in Japan and then internationally. When I asked Matsui how she accounted for Kitty's popularity, she practically shrieked in response: "Because I think humanism is dead! Because people are weak and scared." In a more measured tone, she added: "It's easy to accept Kitty because it's so dumb and expressionless. It doesn't demand that you make any reference."

For an authoritative view, I paid a call at Sanrio on Yuko Yamaguchi, who has been the chief designer of Hello Kitty for 25 years. With long hennaed hair and wearing brown artificial-leather pants, she didn't look the least bit kawaii herself. When she discussed the enduring popularity of Kitty, she

was all business. Hoping to gauge how far Murakami has gone in his quest for wide popularity, I asked her to rate Kaikai, the sweeter, rabbit-costumed half of the Kaikai Kiki toddlers, on the kawaii meter. She was troubled by Kaikai's smiling mouth. "In most Sanrio characters, we don't express an emotion through the mouth," she said. "With Kitty, you don't even see a mouth." She credited this mouthlessness for much of Kitty's popularity. "When someone feels blue or depressed, they may want the character to sympathize with their feeling or to get angry with them or to offer encouragement," she said. "Without a clear expression of the mouth, this is possible. It can be interpreted in different ways."

Murakami understands the infantilism that underlies the Hello Kitty phenomenon. Like otaku culture, kawaii culture for him is an expression of Japan's postwar impotence. (In a photograph with the strapping General MacArthur, the diminutive, once divine Emperor Hirohito looked very kawaii.) However, Murakami is also designing characters that for those unacquainted with his analysis seem simply — and irresistibly — kawaii. It's a delicate balancing act, reaching a mass audience while maintaining a critical distance. "I created Mr. DOB for a really serious reason, but girls would say, 'Oh, cute,'" he told me. "Japanese don't like serious art. But if I can transform cute characters into serious art, they will love my piece." The early DOB's were often distorted and belligerent or combined with jagged lines and distressed surfaces that alluded to traditional Japanese painting. More recently, they seem simply cute.

The appearance of Murakami's DOB coincided with the emerging popularity of Yoshitomo Nara, the other Japanese artist of Murakami's generation who has found great favor in the West. Like Murakami, Nara was drawing cute cartoonlike figures, but more sincerely. His characters were