



CHIHO AOSHIMA, MR. AND AYA TAKANO

EVE SULLIVAN



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WALKING through the exhibition of work by Chiho Aoshima, Aya Takano and the artist who goes by the name of Mr., curated by Takashi Murakami for the Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lyon, you get some idea of the provocation caused by the nation's love-hate relationship to Disneyland Paris. Such travels in hyperreality are par for the course in negotiating the global impact of anime and manga, originally inspired by the American import but long-since outstripping its parent in the complexity of its product to present brave new worlds of fantastic creation, some of decidedly adult content, drawing on Japanese folklore and the unique historical conditions that inflect the imaginings of the present. As participants in the original series of 'superflat' exhibitions that toured to destinations in Japan, Europe and the US in 2001–5 (culminating in the exhibition at the Japan Society in New York of 'Little Boy. The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture', 2005), Aoshima, Takano and Mr. are closely aligned with Murakami's promotion of the *otaku* youth culture of this post-war generation, defined in particular by its fixation on the narratives of escape into a fictional realm.

Thus the work of the eponymous Mr. takes on a peculiarly representative role, with his scenes of a pale, bespectacled youth confined to the dark world of his apartment with eyes for nothing other than the computer/TV screen and his cute girl doll icons as sex toys. Mr.'s *Penyo-Henyo* (2004–6) forms part of the cavalcade of juvenile characters on show in Lyon, and is a figure of humiliation with his pants down around his ankles. Mounted on little soap-box pedestals covered in comic strips, the figures are all the more precarious with their big heads on small under-developed bodies, with large, limpid, stary eyes and big mops of coloured hair, originally derived from representations of Westerners but now assimilated into the stock-in-trade stereotypes of cartoon culture. In other forms, as a series of decapitated heads, they make a ghoulish mobile in abeyance to the absent body.

As demonstrated by his seminal drawings on the back of receipts, subsequently expanded to large scale as painted tarpaulins, there is a do-it-yourself amateurism and hapless compulsion about Mr.'s graphic creations that departs from the model of superflat, with its super clean and shiny perfection, as in the strangely enchanting, vacant face of *Young Sister – Very Nice – Fruit* (2006), which for all its suggestive overtones of a somewhat unsavoury relationship to the beholder avoids any overtly sexual associations. Rather, what seems to characterise this focus on images of little girls, represented both in foot-stamping, ponytail-swinging Samurai mode in *Making Things Right* (2006), and in passive, wide-eyed reflection, as part-victim, part-saviour figure, is the need to remind us of our duty of care. There is a very real reflection on the stories of orphaned and sick children, graphically realised in fictional accounts of a post-holocaust world in which children play an active and often sacrificial role as in *Akira* (1988) and *Nausicaa of the Valley of Wind* (1984).

Taking a more active and decidedly carnal role, Aya Takano's scenes of pre-adolescent Geisha girls enthusiastically engaging in all forms of sexual activity with both boys and girls reanimates the private, domestic sphere as closer to that of Japan's 19th-century subculture of the infamous transient, floating world featured in the popular woodblock prints of the *ukiyo-e* masters, while also taking on board European models. Her girl characters are true Lolitas, heavily made-up 'pretty baby' style with rouged cheeks, smudged red lips and a fashionable indoor pallor emphasised by Kohl-rimmed eyes, who, with their red-rubbed knees and elbows, can also be viewed as everyday little girls caught in a scrape. Dressed up in their kimonos, the environment is a classic Japanese setting of wooden screens, bonsai pot plants and little animals as pets, with the frame extending to more modern updates, including scenes of activity at the kitchen sink, in the back of the car etc. Highlighting her investment in the uninhibited expression and freedom of all living things, it is in her representation of animals that Takano brings to the fore the playful, impromptu expression of natural desires. Her soulful representation of animals, modelled on the German expressionist Franz Marc's horses and deer perhaps, provides Takano's peculiar gamine world with a sympathetic resonance and also something of its world-weary suggestion. Notably sending up the peculiarly Japanese culture of the cute animal, the centrepiece of Takano's exhibition is a super-sized version of a black bitch as a big fluffy toy, standing there, peculiarly unsteady on its thin little legs, with its vacant button eyes, teats extended and tongue hanging out, as if perennially on heat.

Sharing something of the exclusivity of Takano's feminine world, although none of its reassuring domesticity and overt physicality, Chiho Aoshima's Amazonian nymphettes occupy a post-human netherworld of death and destruction closely aligned with the archetypal heroism and foundation myths of the sci-fi world of *DAICON IV Opening Animation* (1983), *Nausicaa* and even *Godzilla* (1954). In her large digital murals and five-screen animation version of her ongoing 'City Glow' series, towering skyscrapers jostle with reptilian creatures, rolling hills and the tendrils of plant growth, to reinvest the urban

landscape with spirit as a means of healing the devastation wrought. With Tokyo in mind, as the setting of *Godzilla's* fury and the site always predicted of a monster earthquake, these strangely organic cityscapes are far from permanent, like the lives of their human inhabitants. The hills, like the buildings, have eyes, invoking the animism of living things as the central tenet of Japanese Shinto belief.

As represented here in graveyard scenes of walking corpses or swirling zombies and other ghoulish deities, like the matriarchal wailing figure that resounds throughout the gallery spaces in the video version of her ongoing 'City Glow' series, Aoshima's images are full of references to the vampiric priestesses and demon princesses that populate the anime world. In other works of curiously morbid reflection that yet inject some sense of hope, cherry blossoms grow out of a young girl's supine head, or, in *Girl from the depths* (2006), create lines of energy that earth a girl's irradiated white body. *Magma Spirit Explodes, Tsunami is Dreadful* (2004), perhaps Aoshima's most famous image to date, is the personification of disaster as a red-eyed fury, releasing hellfire and tidal waves. This scene of devastation is paired with an arcadian vision of redemption in the ascending bands of nymphs holding hands to rise up, above the carnage. There is both intimacy and immensity in the attention to the minutiae of the detail, invoking on the one hand further references to graphic horror, but also a preternaturally light and sympathetic sweetness in evocation of the Japanese predilection for beauty defined by transience. So, too, these delicate filigree workings of the imagination highlight the fluid space between life and death, good and evil, in a graphic departure from the upfront one-dimensionality of the Disneyland model.

CHIHO AOSHIMA – MR. – AYA TAKANO IS ON EXHIBITION AT THE MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAINE, LYON, UNTIL 31 DECEMBER 2006. CHIHO AOSHIMA IS ALSO THE SUBJECT OF A MAJOR SOLO EXHIBITION AT THE BALTIC CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART, GATESHEAD, UNTIL 28 JANUARY 2007.

EVE SULLIVAN IS A WRITER BASED IN LONDON



Aya Takano, *Untitled*, 2006. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Aya Takano, *Untitled*, 2006. Mr., *Penyo-Henyo* 2004–6. Chiho Aoshima, *Untitled*, 2006. All photos: F. Kleinleff. All images courtesy: Gallery Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris/Miami, the artists, Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lyon and Kaikio Kiki, Co.