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About Aya TAKANO

Flatlands

by Ivan VARTANIAN

The girls populating Aya TAKANO's paintings subvert the trope of the wide-eyed, sexualized anime character, combining fantasy with unflinching honesty. Ivan VARTANIAN is a Tokyo-based writer, curator, and publisher who works under the imprint Goliga. For GARAGE, he reflects on TAKANO's ever-developing style and its engagement with Japanese culture.

Aya Takano bloomed as an artist in the late 1990s, as part of a new wave of Japanese artists who rejected both the formal conventions of Western art, such as one-point perspective and classic color theory, and the quietism of classical Japanese images. Their work is based on images of popular culture, particularly manga, anime, and model-making, with the contours of the Japanese art tradition showing through in their compositional forms. The clear outlines and flat arrangements of Takano's early work – pencil illustrations and sketches – demonstrate this plainly. Rather than building depth with perspective and foreground/background, she placed her components within one equivalent dimension that stretches out to left and right, as though her worlds were assemblages of connected panels.

The internationally known artist, curator, and impresario Takashi Murakami, founder of the artists' collective Kaikai Kiki (translated as grotesque yet elegant), dubbed this style "super-flat." In contrast to artists who seem to try to contain the world within the boundaries of a canvas, for Takano and her Kaikai Kiki cohorts, the universe is beyond containment. Even as Takano shifted her focus to painting, working in gouache and acrylics, she retained her strong sense of form and tidy placement of color; her colors do not run together, and her figures do not melt or yield to the flow of pigments.

Takano is one of the few Kaikai Kiki artists who have transitioned from illustration work to larger projects. Much like her prolific mentor Murakami, Takano's

artwork is informed by the idea of maintaining a consistent level of production, which makes her seem like a one-person workshop rather than an artist in a studio.

In the years when Takano was maturing as an artist, young girls – or the idea of young girls – became a focus of attention in Japan. Young girls were the focal point of visual art, while young female consumers were recognized by manufacturers and retailers as a new and powerful segment of the market. The era of girlie culture would last for the next decade, and eventually yield a generation of child-women. The figures that populate Takano's world are part of this generation. While big, lozenge-shaped eyes have become a common feature of post-anime character design, Takano's continued use of this



AYA TAKANO
FURYU OOOCHI CELEBRATION, 2012
OIL ON CANVAS
130.2 x 80.3 CM (40 1/4 x 31 1/4 INCHES)
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“Her figures do not project insipid naïveté, but comfort

visual trope has less to do with infantilism and prolonged adolescence than with a certain type of eroticism that is particular to her generation. Her figures do not project insipid naïveté, but comfort with a fully formed sexuality.

with a fully formed sexuality”

the resulting tsunami caused massive and near-instantaneous loss of life along the eastern seaboard of Japan, as well as a meltdown of the Fukushima nuclear power plant. In Japan, this was not seen as a freak accident. Rather, it demonstrated the incalculable force of nature, which, being more powerful than man, demands reverence. This led to a resurgence of animism, a central tenet of Eastern philosophy, which holds that all things, both animate and inanimate, are connected. The essential components of all matter are one and the same and, therefore, we must accept our place within a network of being, relinquishing our ideas of dominion and control.

The Body is a Canvas

A series of drawings that Takano did early in her career placed the figure of a young girl in a back-flip position. The area above her abdomen was then treated as a stage, upon which a panoply of scenes was drawn: episodes from history, references to other paintings, dramatic scenes, cityscapes. This equation between body and canvas (or stage) is a recurring theme in Takano's work. At times, the tattooed images on a girl's form serve as a painting within a painting. This connection with ornamentation or decorative arts is apparent in her more recent work, which is strongly influenced by the fin-de-siècle Viennese artist Gustav Klimt, who used the human figure as the very form of his ornamentations. His figures emerge out of swirling masses or are encrusted with patterns and colors. Takano, too, creates a back-and-forth between body and ornament, as well as a back-and-forth between dimensionality and flatness in her figures.

Animism

The nighttime cityscapes that typified Takano's work of the late 2000s have, in her recent paintings, been replaced by a daylight color palette and a profusion of flora and fauna. This shift stems from the events of March 11, 2011, when an earthquake and

In Takano's work, this theme is expressed by the animals, both domesticated and wild, that populate her paintings. There is an ostensible connection with her roots in pop art, and its reverence for adorable cartoon characters, but here she is working on a deeper level, drawing on ancient ideas about the connectedness of man to nature, and its power. Yet there is nothing somber in her tone; her acceptance and embrace of nature, with its power to destroy, is particularly Japanese. Takano synthesizes animism and the decorative by creating tableaux of kinetic shapes upon which her figures rest. Her flat, graphic motifs extend into infinity, as does the continuum of nature that supports her young females. The world, as she gives it to us, is beautifully chaotic.



AYA TAKANO
KEISAI EESN: WITH OISO STATION 9TH ON HER BACK, 2002
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
72.7 x 91 CM (28 1/4 x 36 1/4 INCHES)

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