

Inside *Mediarena*: contemporary art from Japan in context

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Recent developments in Japanese art have often been exemplified internationally by a narrow range of work characterised as neo-pop, particularly work that draws on sub-cultural references to *manga* (cartoons) and *anime* (animation). *Mediarena: contemporary art from Japan* seeks to present a broader range of work in order to develop a layered analysis of contemporary Japanese art. The project reflects important and exciting developments in Japanese contemporary art, with a particular emphasis on art being made now in Tokyo and Osaka. It features artists working across a wide range of media including painting, sculpture, installation, photography, sound art and video and has a special focus on the high level of digital animation and interactive work being produced in Japan today.

Taking the practice of senior Japanese artists Yayoi Kusama, Tatsuo Miyajima, and Noboru Tsubaki as its starting point, *Mediarena* explores the increasing relevance of their work for a new generation of Japanese artists. By linking work by three generations of artists, the exhibition places the work in an art historical framework rather than simply interpreting work against recent changes in Asian pop culture and technology. This approach also reflects the ease with which the younger artists in the exhibition shift between modes of practice and changes of medium; artists who produce work that slips effortlessly between hi-end technology, pop-cultural and futuristic forms, traditional motif, and strategies common to performance art and video making from the 1960s.

This tendency in contemporary practice in Japan gives the exhibition its title *Mediarena*, a title intended to indicate the multiplying set of images, media and genre that are now ubiquitous in the 21st Century, particularly in the metropolitan centres of Japan, and a title that indicates a sense of 'between-ness' explored by the artists; an unwillingness to locate an artistic practice in one single position. What follows is a consideration of some of the overlapping themes and tendencies revealed through the exhibition.

THE METROPOLIS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

All of the artists in *Mediarena* are urban based living and working in the Kanto region (Tokyo) or in the Kansai region (Osaka, Kobe, and Kyoto). Each is a tight but sprawling and multi-layered metropolitan centre, sharing many similarities and some differences. Kansai culture generally tends to be louder and more commercially oriented, whereas Kanto with its links to government is often thought to be more monochrome and simple in its tastes. Osaka was also the setting for the World Expo 1970, perhaps the last utopian moment of any scale in Japan.

There is evidence to suggest differences in orientation between the art scenes in Kansai and Kanto. In *Mediarena* the differences are subtle. The Gutai movement of the 1950's was born in Ashiya, near Osaka and, with their multi-media disposition manifest in their attention to site and their attention to the multidimensionality of material including action and sound, they are a reference for many artists. One can trace their legacy in the 1990s Osaka-based multimedia group Dumb Type and more recently the multimedia Osaka based cabaret group Kyupi Kyupi included in *Mediarena*. However the Gutai legacy can also be felt in the work of Tatsuo Miyajima, based in Tokyo. Many of the more complex animation installations in the exhibition have been produced by artists from the Kansai region including Miwa Yanagi, Tabaimo and Tadasu Takamine and in previous works Noboru Tsubaki has featured robotics, and banks of computer terminals. This is not to say that Kansai art

is more technologically based for the most cutting edge work in this area is arguably produced by exonomo with their live internet installations. exonomo's work however is characterised by simplicity and directness.

More than difference, a common concern with the density and artificiality of urban space can be detected with many of the artists. Naoya Hatakeyama has, since the mid-1980s, developed a large number of photo series showing landscapes and places that are marked by industrialisation and globalisation. He does not restrict himself to Tokyo or even Japan. Indeed one of his more memorable recent images, exhibited at the Venice Biennale 2001, is of a sports stadium in Osaka that enclosed a residential block and parking lot within its arena. His images depict the effects of humanity on the landscape, yet ironically humanity itself is usually absent, leading to a ghostly quality like the one present in the *River* series. These images of underground waterways in Tokyo are symbolic of his methods, showing an uninhabited beautiful world that, nevertheless, is also a deeply human, man-made world. We see the towers of Tokyo, themselves monuments to technology, artifice and globalisation, set against the often hidden sewers that carry away the natural and unnatural effluent and discharge of those same towers. He lines up the division between sewer and tower in all the images as if intimating an artificial horizon. Architecture and nature appear both remote and close, bewitchingly beautiful backdrops in a strangely unreal world. Dense and strangely claustrophobic spaces are either depicted or conjured by many of the other artists. We feel them in the intricate details of Akira Yamaguchi's paintings of Tokyo or the enclosed and at times looped and artificial spaces explored by Motohiko Odani, Yanagi, Tabaimo, Hiroyuki Matsukage and Saki Satom, who frequently performs in and documents public spaces such as underground stations, retail and office buildings, fast-food outlets and airports. Her works explore the intersection between public and private space by creating situations that allow her to interact with the public in ways that unexpectedly expose patterns of behaviour and cast them in a fresh light. A tension between extremely tight physical space and the seemingly unlimited virtual space offered by the digital screen was effected in *A space of one's own*, a work commissioned for a group show, *AkihabaraTV*, held in a unique area of Tokyo called Electric City where shops selling electronic equipment are concentrated. Satom usually documents actions in public space for exhibition in a gallery. This time she did the opposite, displaying a private space and action in a public space on many screens. Another of her works *From B to H* explores the idea of public and private space interacting, by focusing on a special sound-erasing soundtrack in a lift. In Tokyo, background soundtracks are frequently used to eliminate personal noise in public spaces such as toilets and lifts. We see the video as if through a video surveillance camera. The protagonist dances to the soundtrack when there is no one with her, but conforms to expected patterns of behaviour when someone enters the lift.

DURATION AND THE INFINITE

Explorations of notions of time and the infinite have persisted in Japanese contemporary art from at least the 1950s with the performances and experiments of the Gutai group of artists. The most consistent and persistent consideration of such notions is found in the work of Tatsuo Miyajima. He made his international debut at the Venice Biennale in 1988 with the acclaimed work *Sea of time* but as a student he experimented with performance works that interrogated the nature of existence. The focus on time allows him to attend to the immaterial and even metaphysical nature of existence. Reinforced by his readings of Buddhist philosophy he has proposed three tenets that inform his work: keep changing, connect with everything, and continue

forever. For 20 years Miyajima has manifest this focus through sculptures and installations that involve light-emitting electronic counting devices. For *Mediarena* he introduced a new form, being works from his *Counter me on* series, diptychs of computerised counting devices featuring different coloured neon tubes.

Ideas of continuance have also long informed the work of Yayoi Kusama. From childhood Kusama has experienced hallucinations of repeating dots and flowers and her work is in a sense an attempt to come to terms with and order her perceptions. By implication her repetitions of dots, flowers and mirror balls could potentially extend infinitely, a fact she emphasises through the use of devices such as mirrors, lights and the wall-papering of patterns. Significantly, in the mid 1960's she organised performances, "happenings" and body-painting festivals. Having recorded many of these actions on film, she continues to make performances for camera.

Miyajima and Kusama may make work that seems to evoke the mystical and the fantastical respectively, but both are also interested in the repetitions of the everyday, an interest that is manifest in diverse ways by many of the artists in *Mediarena*. The work by Takamine, *God Bless America*, is a pertinent example, a work that relies on two overlapping readings of time. It documents an 18 day performance by Takamine and his assistant and compresses the performance into a video projection lasting less than an hour. The two performers spend their work time manipulating a large mound of clay, but also documented is their down time, resting, sleeping, eating and making out. The alternate time frame is provided by the clay, which is moulded to form an animated head, which moves and sings in real 'claymation' time. To add a further sense of displacement to the sensation of time, both the action of the clay head and the action of the performers appear incessant due to the looping of the projection.

This temporal effect of the video loop is exploited by many artists in the exhibition including Noboru Tsubaki, Makoto Aida, Miya Yanagi, Motohiko Odani, Tabaimo, Kyupi Kyupi and Satom, one of the youngest *Mediarena* artists. *M. station run* is one of a number of manipulated video works she has shot at rush hour. In this case Satom walks through a subway with a sign that says "no overtaking," but people ignore her because of their haste. Although it looks like the rush for the trains is constant, it is exaggerated due to the video being looped. The surging crowds are configured as never-ending waves.

Slippage between different moments occurs in a number of other works in the exhibition; with Akira Yamaguchi and Tabaimo, who both simultaneously reference a pre-modern and post-modern Japan in their work, and by Yanagi, who, in her projected video work *Kagome kagome* morphs different characters, places and moments into one time frame. Duration is also an essence of Mika Kato's paintings, which take an extraordinarily long time to paint, given that they first involve the artist making the doll she later paints, combined with the subsequent painstaking detail she achieves in the painting. exonomo's work *FragMental storm* involves a 'live' feed off the internet, while photo artist Hatakeyama is not only a master of the use of light, he can also capture the instant of an explosion, as shown in the series *Blast*, to bring time to a standstill. His involvement and interest in temporality is accentuated by his determination to present his work in series, as suspended moments both temporally and conceptually linked.

The most disquieting investigations of duration in the exhibition explore the finality of death. The duration of human life is always implicit in Miyajima's work and at times is made more explicit, as in the major installation *Megadeath*, which he presented at the Venice Biennale in 1999; however, more socially explicit references to death and suicide are overt in the work of Aida, Kusama and Tabaimo.

BETWEEN

It has been frequently noted in international publications that much contemporary Japanese art employs leading-edge technology in keeping with Japan's reputation as a new technology pacesetter. This tendency can be identified in *Mediarena*, with its high proportion of projected video and animation, notwithstanding the fact that projection installations are now commonplace in major international exhibitions around the globe. Nevertheless, while many museums and artists have only recently come to terms with the shift from videotape to video disc, many Japanese artists have abandoned the video disc altogether in favour of the high-end computer, which allows for greater manipulation and resolution of the image, exonomo, Miyajima, Tabaimo and Takamine, being pertinent examples in *Mediarena*.

However, to classify the work in *Mediarena* as simply hi-tech would be to deny the re-emergence of more traditional media and the general resistance of many of the artists to being defined in relation to medium or technology. Take for example Aida, who moves between traditional Japanese painting formats, to posters and comic books albeit with strong *manga* (cartoon) references, to video and performance, through to photography, sculpture and installation. Another example is Noboru Tsubaki, who followed his project *UN Boy* at Art Tower, Mito, 2003 which used computers and robotics, with *Radikal Dialogue* for *Mediarena*, which used a pre-modern technology in the form of numerous underground kilns to produce charcoal that he later incorporated into *Radikal aqua*, a working model for an inexpensive and easily sustainable water filtration unit which could be used in impoverished countries with water contamination problems.

We have hybrid groups such as Gorgerous, who are musicians and image-makers, whose performances and imagery borrow from the rock-star posturing of American pop culture and who play and perform with sculptures they call *Love arms*, hybrid instruments built by Gorgerous member Munetero Ujino that key into the combined histories of avant-garde music, conceptual art, science fiction and the disco hall.

Kyupi Kyupi is another example, being a multimedia collective of artists, designers, performers, musicians and programmers who principally produce video installations, television shows and live cabaret performances. Unabashed in their desire to entertain, the collective excels in epitomising a post-modern hybridity in popular culture by combining references to urban popular culture, cyber culture, *manga*, and soft porn with the more traditional performance practices of cabaret and theatre.

The appearance of painting in *Mediarena* could be taken as a reassertion of traditional art media, but frequently the artists' use of painting appears out of character in some way. Kato appears at first to be engaging established painting concerns, however her process involves sculpting and photography, while a close inspection of the surface of her paintings reveals that they are covered with minute multi-coloured dots, reminding the viewer of pixels, the building blocks of the digital imagery that abounds in Japan. Aida's *Dog* series of paintings might be read as a homage to the tradition of nihonga, a traditional painting style that privileged beautiful subject matter, yet such a possibility of respect is undercut by the savagery of the content, which depicts cute naked girls who have been hacked to make them look like dogs. The sense of a deflated nostalgia in Aida's work is also apparent in Tabaimo's installation *Japanese interior*. Ironically, even though Tabaimo uses a purpose-built powerful computer to drive this interactive installation, the animation itself is not produced through a computer programme. Each cell is hand-drawn and painted in a style reminiscent of ukiyo-e woodblock printing. Any sense of the sentimental is

however subverted by the sardonic and at times violent character of the subject matter.

FANTASY AND PLAY

Despite its dark undercurrents Tabaimo's *Japanese interior* also engages a sense of fantasy and play, a characteristic we can also track through much of the work in the exhibition. In some ways *Japanese interior* functions like a video game, by challenging the viewer to discover and move through its different levels, and like a video game or *anime* (animation) the work also engages the fantastic; within its depiction of a traditional Japanese domestic setting we see a salary man incarcerated in a refrigerator, a ukiyo-e print come to life and one sumo wrestler suck the life out of another as if he were a balloon. There is a sense of playfulness in the dress-up scenarios presented by Sawada, while Kato's images seem to relate to children's toys, childhood memories and hybrid fantasies.

Despite its other readings Takamine's work also evokes a sense of whimsy and childlike playfulness, while Odani presents a fantastic world in the animated works *Rompers* and *Caterpillar*, which seem to blend genres of children's stories with science fiction. The scene in *Rompers* is innocent at first glance but includes sinister surprise elements. One soon realises that the girl and her environment, which includes mutant animals, display all the hallmarks of genetic modification. Darker in mood, *Caterpillar* depicts an even more surreal sinister scene reminiscent of science fiction, horror films, or a child's nightmare. The works play with fantasy future-scapes that appear in both Japanese *manga* and *anime* films and Hollywood movies, keying into fantasies and fears of an emerging artificial or post-human world.

The playful acting out of make-believe is also central to the photo installation *Star* by Matsukage. He often explores issues of performance in his work: the way in which people perform for a camera, the tendency of photography to produce clichéd characters, public desire for celebrity, and willingness to act like one's celebrity heroes. As much as *Star* refers to celebrity-adulation and the popularity of karaoke in Japan, it also attempts to convey the actual feeling of being a star to the viewer, a feeling Matsukage experiences himself with his other artistic persona as the lead singer and guitarist in Gorgerous. The viewer speaks/sings/yells into the microphone and a photographic sea of young girls scream and cheer in adulation accordingly. The viewer becomes a player.

Not least among the many attributes of Kusama's work is its abundant sense of playfulness. She uses childlike devices such as body-painting and balloons, and paints her room using Technicolor dots. Ultimately she envisions polka dots and flowers, fantasises about them, and then enacts her visions and fantasies. It is this enacting that evokes the fantastical sensibility of the child. It may in part reflect her struggle against the odds that has characterized her life, but more importantly it is perhaps the most tangible way that she can achieve her goal to remove the separation between art and life, given that no contradiction exists for Kusama between herself and her art.

GIRL

The notion of play and fantasy is intrinsic to Japanese pop culture, not least in the image of the young girl, often depicted as cute. The "girl" image proliferates in the commercial and pop-cultural side of latter day Japan, even into adult life. It is not surprising then to find it appearing in different forms in *Mediarena*. Rather than reinforcing stereotypes that are transmitted through the "girl" image the artists use the image to explore the complex identity of women in Japanese society, as with the paintings of Kato, whose subjects, with their cuteness and larger-than-life eyes, bear some similarity to the girl-hero characters found in Japanese *manga*. But Kato also

chooses the doll subject as a point of difference from *manga* characters. An acute attention to detail, combined with the fact that the dolls are moulded from clay that Kato has costumed and furnished with glass eyes and human hair, unnerves any easy reading of cuteness and femininity.

Tomoko Sawada is another young artist addressing issues of identity. Since 1998 she has been making photographs that explore her identity both as an artist and a Japanese woman. For the series *Omiiai*, Sawada portrays herself as 30 different personalities in photographs of the type used to initiate arranged marriages. In this long Japanese tradition, potential brides dress in formal attire and have their pictures taken at a professional portrait studio. The parents subsequently exchange and distribute cards featuring the photos to other families and relatives in hope of finding a suitable husband for their daughter. Seen together the images expose and thereby deconstruct a Japanese language of male desire involving the objectification of women.

Similar territory is explored by Yanagi, well known internationally for her 1997 series *Elevator girls*, which depicted multiple versions of the beautifully groomed young women in tailored suits that can be found at the entrances to Japanese department stores, on their escalators and in elevators. Tailored and uniformed women also appear in the video installation *Kagome kagome*, where they move down a long, deep corridor. Through the duration of the video the girls subtly morph from lift girls, to nurses, to hotel staff, and into air hostesses. Despite the modernity of the settings and the women's uniforms, the mannerisms of the women themselves subtly reveal the long tradition of female subservience in Japanese society.

The most contentious and biting satirical deployment of the "girl" image in the exhibition is by Aida, whose hybrid images comment on the often violent undercurrents of *manga* and its constant stereotyping of the image of young girls. He complicates such depictions by rendering them in a venerated form such as nihonga or by mixing them with references to real life as with the work *Hara-kiri school girls*. This depicts *kogals* committing *hara-kiri* samurai style, *kogal* being a term used for young Japanese girls who are often seen in school uniforms, mini skirts and loose socks, but who also wear expensive brand-name clothes, accessories and make-up. While Aida's work wryly comments on the effects of *manga* it also refers to codes of ritualised and stereotyped behaviour that underpin traditional Japanese social and sexual attitudes.

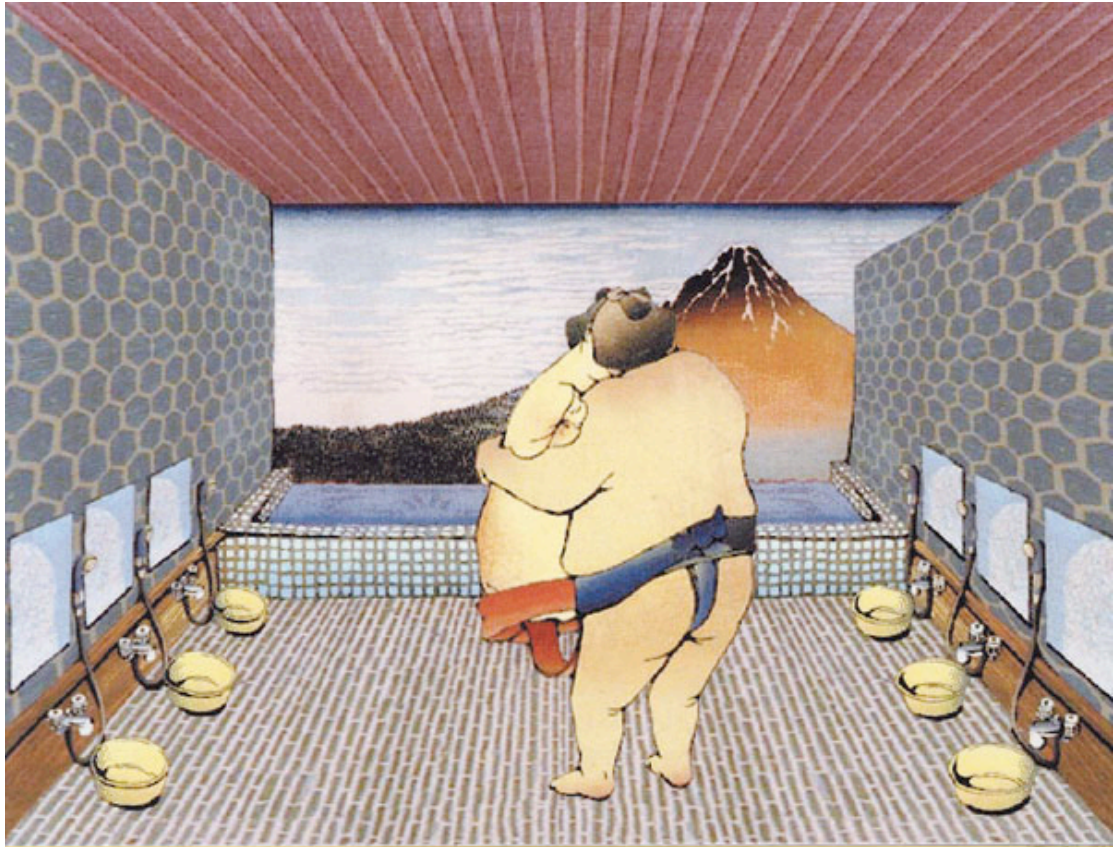
OBSESSION AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

Within *Mediarena* we can discern an interest in the psychology of devotional and obsessional behaviour, Kusama's obsession with dots and flowers perhaps being the most obvious. There is also an obsessional aspect to Sawada's, Yanagi's and Kato's explorations of identity and with Takamine's and Matsukage's synthetic devotional or shrine-like spaces. In many cases however, this quality is exploited as a means of social critique.

Take for example Aida's *Suicide machine*. The artist presents us with the ultimate in obsession, with all its contradictions. The machine appears as the last word in accessories for the man who has everything. The hanging device comes replete with pouches containing cigarettes and lighter, a mobile phone and a flask of sake. On the video screen we see our protagonist have his last smoke and drink, call his girlfriend and then attempt suicide, only to fail and start over repeatedly. Here Aida is poking fun at his country's traditions as well as commenting on the emptiness of consumer desire, as does the work *Edible artificial girls*, which neatly comments not only on the Japanese obsession with girly imagery but also that of packaging and consumerism. Aida debunks obsessional behaviour as a means of effecting social critique.

Such strategies also prevail in Tabaimo's *Japanese interior*, a work that implicitly but nevertheless strongly critiques the customs and infatuations it portrays, while a debunking of the workaholic and conformist Japanese worker is implicit in the work of Satom. Yanagi is equally critical of Japanese customs, while Takamine also reflects a current anxiety in Japan over the intentions of the United States and the fact that Japanese troops have been sent into a combat zone for the first time since World War II. Again we can look to Kusama as a precursor with her anti-Vietnam War "happenings".

The sense of darkness and social critique that surfaces at points in *Mediarena* reflects an emergent characteristic in Japanese art and in that sense it is a distinguishing feature of the show, which separates it from surveys focusing on lightness and neo-Pop tendencies. We see then a younger generation of artists increasingly prepared to examine Japan's own history and customs and one also prepared to address social issues both at home and in the West.



Shot 1 Tabaimo Japanese Interior 2002 Collection Govett-Brewster Art Gallery