

Art Review

“Bye Bye Kitty! Hello Chaos!”

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Art Review Editors

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Yoshitomo Nara
Untitled, 2008
10 ½" x 7 7/8"

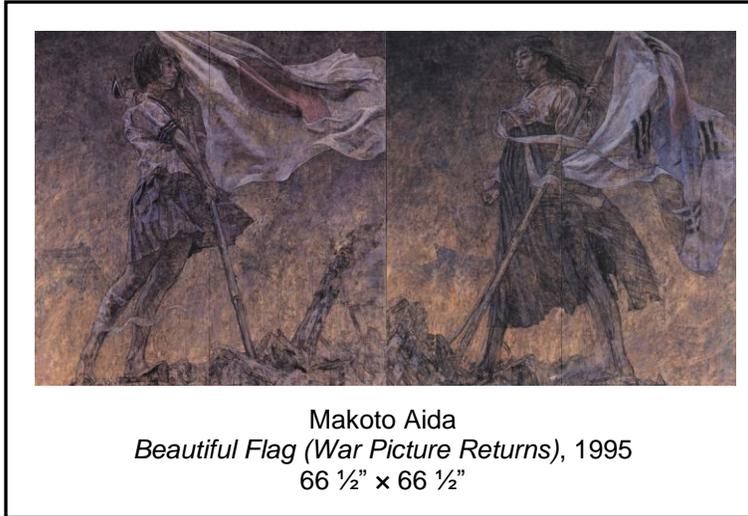
The Japan Society is located one block from the United Nations headquarter on the East Side of Manhattan. Two years ago the gallery staff began planning the current exhibition curated by David Elliot, Director of the Tokyo Mori Art Museum, entitled *Bye Bye Kitty!!! Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art*. The exhibition runs from March 18 until June 12, 2011 at Japan Society Gallery in New York City. Elliot describes the exhibition in these words: “Here we see Japanese artists critically examining tradition and history; responding to a threatened natural world; and expressing an unquiet, even nightmarish, consciousness. Taken together, these three approaches comprise a quintessentially Japanese response to the present and the future.” The exhibition include 16 Japanese artists (an equal number of men and women, ages 27- 45: Kohei Nawa,

Tomoko Shioyasu, Yamaguchi Akira, Makoto Aida, Haruka Kojin, Chiharu Shiota, Manabu Ikeda, Tomoko Kashiki, Kumi Machida, Yoshitomo Nara, Rinko Kawauchi, Motohiko Odani, Hisashi Tenmyouya, Hiraki Sawa, Miwa Yanagi, and Tomoko Yoneda. In this mixed media exhibition, these emerging and mid-career Japanese artists go beyond Manga and Anime in their rejection of all things cute (Kawaii) personified by the mouthless Sanrio Cute Kitty. In violent and harsh tones, the artists express a collective feeling for the entropic collapse of modern Japan suspended between heaven and hell. Some of these artists attribute the decline to American imperialism which emasculated the Japanese and deprived them of a new Imperial army, while others emphasize their disdain

for traditional paternalistic, militaristic, anti-feminist Japan using iconography from the Ukiyo-e woodblock prints and the do-or-die ethos of the Bushido warrior's code.

Selected Artists and Works of Art

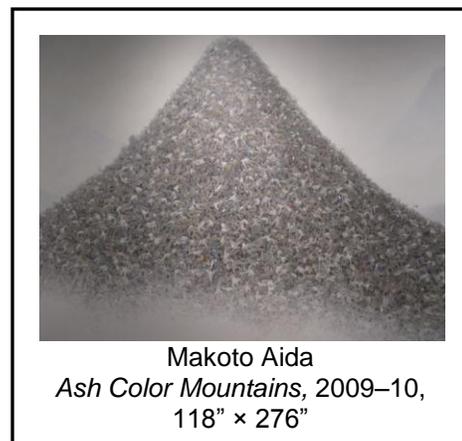
The exhibition is presented in stages: the first begins with what appears to



be Makoto Aida's attack on Japanese imperialism, pervasive corporate culture, and an obsession with sexy school girls. His 1995 diptych painting entitled *Beautiful Flag - War Picture Returns* is a face-off between Japanese and Korean schoolgirls posed in the military propaganda style of the 1930's. Each girl clutches their national flag—the Hinomaru

(Rising Sun) and the Taegeukgi (Unity of All Being)—as they stand toe to toe in war rubble, daring each other to cross an imaginary line of national insult. For 500 years the Japanese repeatedly attacked and invaded Korea, which they occupied from 1910-1945. During their brutal colonial rule the Japanese forbade the teaching of the Korean language (Hangul) and made mere possession of the Korean flag a death penalty offense.

Aida describes himself as a conceptual artist who suffers from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and does not like painting but has a need to use art to express his concepts. He complains that the Japanese have become soft and submissive and do not have a real army because of America. Their fabled devoted salarymen, lifetime corporate employees, are weak and should be discarded, as they are in his detailed 2009-11 painting *Ash Color Mountain*. He created a mound composed of thousands of dead salarymen intertwined with their desks, computers, office furniture, and briefcases. Aida sees Japanese men as feminized and submissive. They should rise up and commit ritual suicide to regain their honor, as do his neurotic-erotic students in his 2002 *Harakiri School Girls*. Each



of the girls willingly smiles in orgasmic relief as she slashes open her stomach (Harakiri) in a ritual suicide (Seppuku) that ends in beheading because she cannot live an honorable life. Watching the carnage is a kitty, not the Sanrio Cute Kitty, but one with blood-red eyes. If these events portend the end of Japan, Manabu Ikeda's highly detailed ink drawing chronicles the imminent destruction of Japan, including streaming jet planes from Korea dropping bombs.

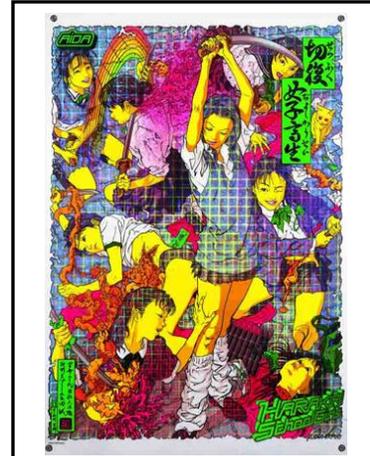


Manabu Ikeda
History of Rise and Fall,
2006.
78 3/4" x 78 3/4"

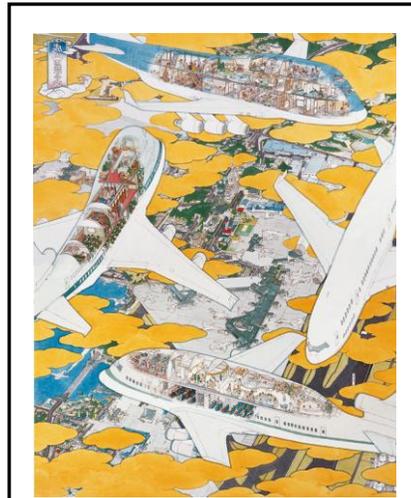
Ikeda's *History of Rise and Fall* (2006) is a highly detailed image which continues the story line of Japan's cultural demise. A teetering tower composed of traditional Japanese homes and seasonal images from Chinese landscape paintings sits in the middle of rice fields. The structure is grounded in Japan's rice culture, but the symbols are empty artifacts, tired icons of a feudal system when the Shoguns

ruled. The drawing contains decaying junk and faded memories that the Japanese cling to in a world that is leaving them behind.

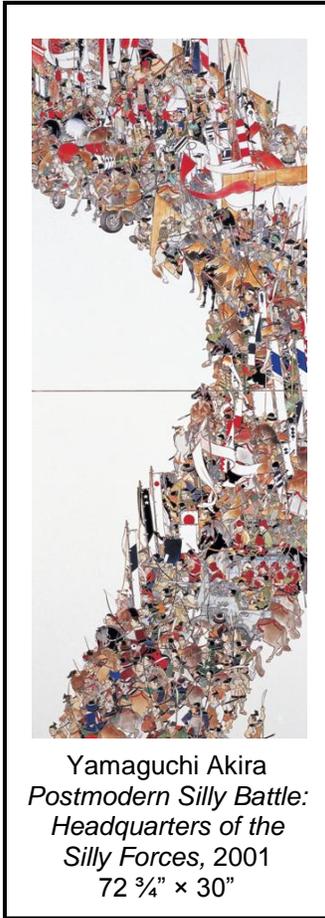
Even when Japan embraces new technology and builds a super modern airport like Narita, north of Tokyo, the jumbo jets contain remnants of their feudal past as depicted in Akira Yamaguchi's 2005 pen and watercolor drawing entitled *Narita International Airport: Various Curious Scenes*. The four large planes fly impossibly close to each other but do not collide. They fly smoothly in a narrow space avoiding eye contact with each other like Japanese commuters in the tightly packed public areas and sidewalks. A 17th-century life style, including public baths and temples, in three of the planes attempts to reconcile the passengers with the past while enjoying the benefits of flying in modern comfort.



Makoto Aida
Harakiri School Girls,
2002
46 3/4" x 33 3/8"



Yamaguchi Akira:
*Narita International Airport:
Various Curious Scenes of
Airplanes*, 2005.
38" x 30 1/8"

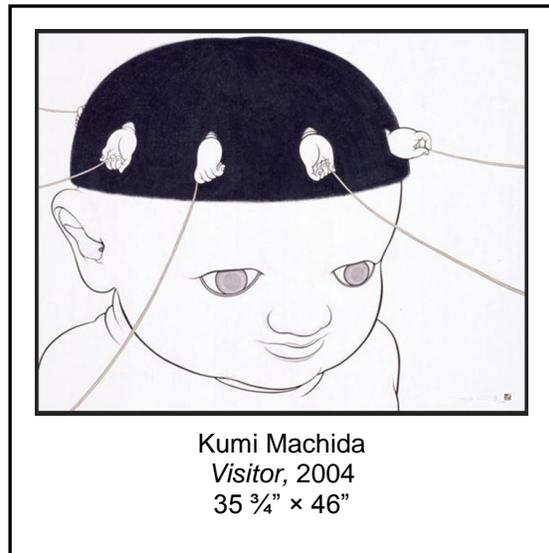


Yamaguchi Akira
*Postmodern Silly Battle:
 Headquarters of the
 Silly Forces, 2001*
 72 ¾" × 30"

Yamaguchi, like Aida, derides the Japanese National Defense Forces in his painting entitled *Postmodern Silly Battle: Headquarters of the Silly Forces* (2001). The feudal era armies of the Shoguns are arrayed on the battlefield facing east toward the homelands of their traditional enemies, China, Russia, and Korea. The ranks of Samurai are armed with swords, spears, bows, arrows, and leather armor which form a map of Japan. Upon closer inspection the medieval army is interspersed with modern weapons, tanks, motorcycles, cannons, and machine guns. They are indeed a silly army waiting to fight a silly battle.

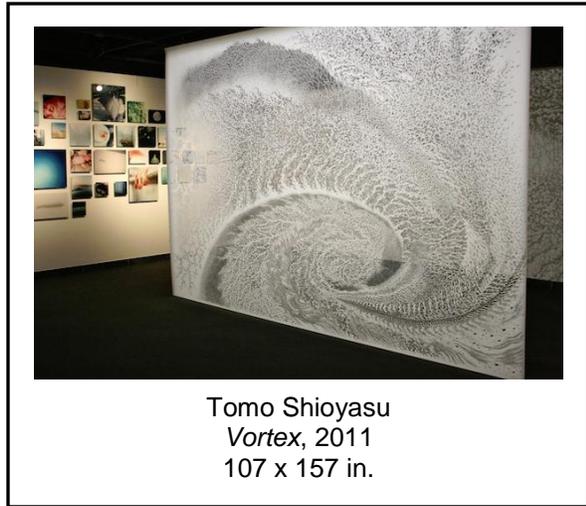
What are the effects of foreign influences that have permeated Japanese culture since the American occupation of 1945 that makes the army silly or even cute like Cute Kitty? The United States still has 55,000 troops stationed in Japan 66 years after the end of the Great Pacific War. Do these alien values change how the Japanese people think or act? Is the younger generation going to accept, replicate, and revere Japan's Shinto past, or fall victim to a future of media influences and foreign values? Will the next generation continue to honor and worship their ancestors?

Kumi Machida's 2004 pigment drawing on linen paper entitled *Visitor* suggests a surreal form of brainwashing for Japanese children. The child's mind is a transceiver with the ability to pull strings and influence others, while at the same time others can pull the strings and impact the child. The tabula rasa vacant stare gives the viewer an odd feeling the child is being programmed with values that make him or her an avatar of an alien culture.



Kumi Machida
Visitor, 2004
 35 ¾" × 46"

Tomoko Shioyasu's enormous translucent papercut entitled *Vortex* (2011) captures the spiritual essence of appreciation for one of the sacred spaces in a Buddhist temple. The fountain or *Temizuya* (手水舎) is near the entrance where worshipers can wash their hands and rinse their mouths before worship. Shioyasu's tornado-like vortex, excised out, sucks all the elements of Japan's decadent life into a deep foreboding whirlpool of destruction. These whirlpools often appear after a tsunami and are caused by the rushing water flowing over the seafloor and the bathymetry of the coastline.



Tomo Shioyasu
Vortex, 2011
107 x 157 in.

If the whirlpool can disfigure the landscape, what about the transformation



Motohiko Odani
SP Extra: Malformed Noh-Mask Series: San Yūjo, 2008.
8 7/8 x 4 7/8 x 2 3/4 in.

of the psyche or spirit? Are the foreign influences changing the Japanese on the inside as well as outside? Motohiko Odani's carved wooden masks entitled *SP Extra: Malformed Noh-Mask: San Yūjo* (2008) reveal the sublimated emotional decay behind the monotone Noh mask expressions.

The Noh drama focuses on one emotion that the main character embodies. Is social decay the emotion of a Japan that needs to say bye bye to the effervescent Cute Kitty?

Conclusion

The artists criticize the regimented expectations of a dualistic society where being part of the whole is expected and individualism rejected. To many foreigners, or *Gaiji* (外国人), Japan is presented as a collective homogeneous culture—one people, one language, one tradition, and one emperor. Who could have imagined one week before the exhibition opened Japan's worst earthquake and tsunami that struck the Tōhoku region killing thousands, displacing hundreds of thousands, and threatening the well being of millions? Interestingly values and

behaviors the exhibition criticizes—Japanese obedience to authority, respect for order, perseverance, and self sacrifice—appeared to ameliorate the situation and embody the stoic acceptance of a human tragedy. The absence of looting and social chaos in the face of a monumental natural disaster with long-term nuclear implications gives further credence to collective discipline. The values this exhibition questions are the concomitant behaviors that bind the Japanese people (*Nipponjin*) together while being caught between heaven and hell. No one in Japan has time to be cute.

Educational Resources

Japan Society, New York City: Biographies and video interviews with Japanese artists in the Bye Bye Kitty!!! exhibition.

<http://www.byebyekittyart.org/artists.htm>

Art & Design New York Times: 11 slides of works in the Bye Bye Kitty!!! exhibition.

<http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2011/03/17/arts/design/20110318-kitty.html>

Lifestyle Washington Post: 12 slides of works in the Bye Bye Kitty!!! exhibition.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/bye-bye-kitty-at-the-japan-society/2011/03/23/ABaMgLLB_gallery.html#photo=9

About Japan: K-12 Educator Resources including lesson plans.

<http://aboutjapan.japansociety.org/>

Exploring *Japanese Arts & Architecture* in the K-12 Art Classroom: A 12-page webography with resources and hotlinks for studying and integrating Japanese arts and crafts in K-12 classrooms.

www.msarted.org/JapanResources.pdf

Creative Japan: A review of contemporary Japan to include Manga, Anime, Games, Contemporary Art, Fashion, Food, Literature, Architecture, Design and Technology.

<http://www.uk.emb-japan.go.jp/en/creativejapan/index.html>

Acknowledgment

We extend appreciation to Mr. Shannon Jowett, Director of Communications, Japan Society, for providing materials from the Bye Bye Kitty!!! exhibition.

Artworks List

(The list shows artworks in the order that they appear in the text.)

Yoshitomo Nara: *untitled*, 2008. C-print, 10 1/2 × 7 7/8 in. (26.6 × 20 cm). Courtesy Tomio Koyama Gallery. Copyright © Yoshitomo Nara.

Makoto Aida: *Beautiful Flag (War Picture Returns)*, 1995. Pair of two-panel sliding screens, hinges, charcoal, paint, glue, acrylic, each 66 1/2 × 66 1/2 in. (169 × 169 cm). Courtesy Mizuma Art Gallery. Takahashi Collection. Copyright © AIDA Makoto.

Makoto Aida: *Ash Color Mountains*, 2009–10. Acrylic on canvas, 118 × 276 in. (300 × 700 cm). Courtesy Mizuma Art Gallery. Taguchi Art Collection. Copyright © AIDA Makoto.

Makoto Aida: *Harakiri School Girls*, 2002. Print on transparency film, holographic film, acrylic, 46 3/4 × 33 3/8 in. (119 × 84.7 cm). Courtesy Mizuma Art Gallery. Watai Collection. Copyright © AIDA Makoto.

Manabu Ikeda: *History of Rise and Fall*, 2006. Pen and acrylic ink on paper, mounted on board, 78 3/4 × 78 3/4 in. (200 × 200 cm). Courtesy Mizuma Art Gallery. Takahashi Collection. Copyright © IKEDA Manabu.

Yamaguchi Akira: *Narita International Airport: Various Curious Scenes of Airplanes*, 2005. Pen and watercolor on paper, 38 × 30 1/8 in. (96.5 × 76.5 cm). Courtesy Mizuma Art Gallery. Private collection, New York. Copyright © YAMAGUCHI Akira.

Yamaguchi Akira: *Postmodern Silly Battle: Headquarters of the Silly Forces*, 2001. Oil and watercolor on canvas, 72 3/4 × 30 in. (185 × 76 cm). Courtesy Mizuma Art Gallery. Takahashi Collection. Copyright © YAMAGUCHI Akira.

Kumi Machida: *Visitor*, 2004. Sumi, mineral pigments, and other pigments on kumohada linen paper, 35 3/4 × 46 in. (90.9 × 116.7 cm). Takahashi Collection.

Tomo Shioyasu: *Vortex*, 2011. Cut paper, 107 × 157 in. Created for the Bye Bye Kitty!!! exhibition.

Motohiko Odani: *SP Extra: Malformed Noh-Mask Series: San Yūjo*, 2008. Wood, natural mineral pigment, Japanese lacquer, set of three, each 8 7/8 × 4 7/8 × 2 3/4 in. (22.5 × 12.5 × 7.0 cm). Courtesy YAMAMOTO GENDAI.