

Aya TAKANO

CoBo Social,

Aya Takano on Manifesting a Utopia in the Imaginary World of Art

November 2020



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Aya Takano. Photo: ©Claire Dorn. Image courtesy of Perrotin. ©2017 Aya Takano/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

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Superflat artist Aya Takano's imagined universe is more than escapism—underneath the layers of fiction and fantasy is a commentary on her perception of the world and its less than utopian realities.

TEXT: Denise Tsui

IMAGES: Courtesy of Perrotin

Denise Tsui

Denise Tsui is the Managing Editor for CoBo Social. A Hong Kong-born Aussie who drinks too much coffee, her research interests are primarily in the dynamics of the art market, modes of display and the study of exhibition models. Denise holds a BA in Fine Arts and a MA in Art Curatorship from the University of Melbourne. Previously she was an editor for ArtAsiaPacific and curator for a private collection of Australian and New Zealand art.

For as long as she could remember, Aya Takano has wanted to become an artist. Influenced by her father, Takano immersed herself in the world of science fiction at a young age, escaping the real world through novels and manga. Osamu Tezuka—the mangaka dubbed the ‘Father of Manga’ and the genius behind creations such as *Astro Boy*—has been a notable inspiration, and *Phoenix*, a series of stories about reincarnation, leaving a particularly deep impression on her. In the equally illusory realm of fine art, Takano cites 20th century Surrealism and artists such as Yayoi Kusama as her favourites. “Both have brought something fresh into the world by exploring a new place that has never existed before,” she tells me. “I think they have activated the world.”



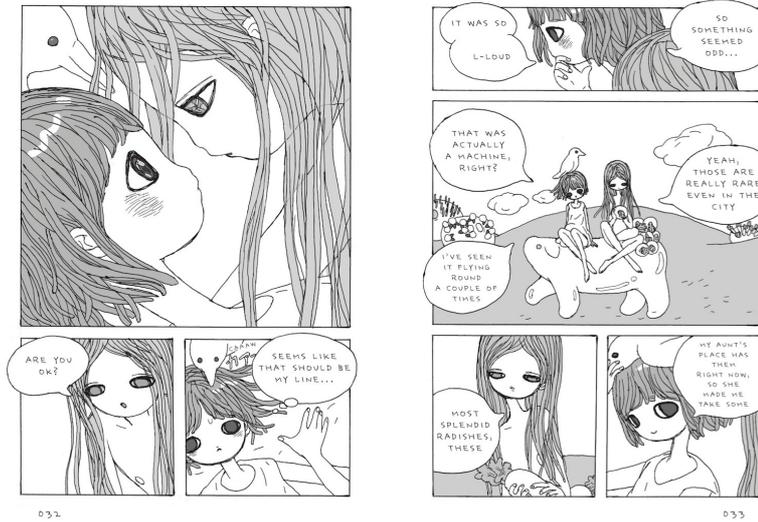
Aya Takano. Photo: ©Claire Dorn. Image courtesy of Perrotin. ©2017 Aya Takano/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

So too has Takano. Following in the path of those she most admires, the Japanese artist has created a unique and fantastical world of her own through her paintings, drawings and illustrations.

In Takano's universe there is an incessant hint towards an existence that is both utopian and dystopian; nothing is quite as it seems, myth and legend are utilised in scenes that attempt to tell stories—Takano's own science fiction. Her characters appear ambiguous, androgynous, almost trapped in a moment of youth. When asked about the non-specific gender of her characters, she says, "In the future, I believe 'gender' will solely be the word to describe the mechanism of an individual body. We are now coming to understand that there is such a wide diversity [in gender identity] depending on the individual. While I cannot tell what the biological and survival consequences of this will be, I am curious to find out about the future of this path."

Traversing the boundaries of fine art and illustration, Takano published her first manga book in 2002 (an English version was later released in 2009). *Spaceship EE* tells the story of Noshi who embarks on an adventure-filled mission to the galaxies and stars via a stolen spaceship. Arguably, the protagonist Noshi is really Takano herself reflected in her manga. In 2009, Takano published her second manga book, *Cosmic Juice*, in English, and in 2017, on the occasion of her solo exhibition at Perrotin in Paris, the artist published *The Jelly Civilization Chronicle*. In both English and Japanese, the manga included a postcard featuring her monumental painting *The World in Two Hundred Years* (2017), which was unveiled alongside 26 preparatory paintings and drawings made for the manga. To fully grasp the depth of Takano's imagined world, one must see it through her manga. "I do love science fiction as a genre where all social forms, states of mind and ways of all lives are experimented to physically form the future with certainty," says the artist. And this is perhaps no better exemplified than in *The Jelly Civilization Chronicle*, described in the publication synopsis as "a curiously antique sci-fi world 200 years from now. It's a super sustainable utopia where androgynous

creatures live and love in a sweet decadence of subtle perversion without being hurt by anything,” in an existence where “everything is made of a jelly-like soft substance which will eventually dissolve into the soil.”



Aya Takano, *The Jelly Civilization Chronicle*. Published by Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. Design: Jun Kawana, 186 page, 182 x 257 mm. ©2017 Aya Takano/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.



Aya Takano, *The World in Two Hundred Years*, 2017, oil on canvas, 130.3 x 194 cm.

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These days, although science fiction is still her favourite genre, the 44-year-old artist admits she's rarely reading them anymore.

"Looking back, I think I was very uncomfortable with the world I knew and its system until I left school and my parents' place. I think I was always looking for another world," she tells me. "Now I am in an adventure that is my life, and that is probably why I have lost some interest [in science fiction]." And this adventure appears to be plentifully diverse and rich. After the Great East Japan Earthquake and nuclear accidents of 11 March 2011, the emotional impact was such that Takano took up meditation and yoga, and became a vegetarian. Around the same time, she also took up *syamisen* (Japanese traditional guitar) lessons, and traditional Japanese dance. In a 2014 interview on the occasion of "May All Things Dissolve in the Ocean of Bliss"—her first major solo exhibition with Kaikai Kiki Gallery in Tokyo in eight years—Takano noted how meditation allowed her to begin seeing the world with a deeper sense of engagement than before.

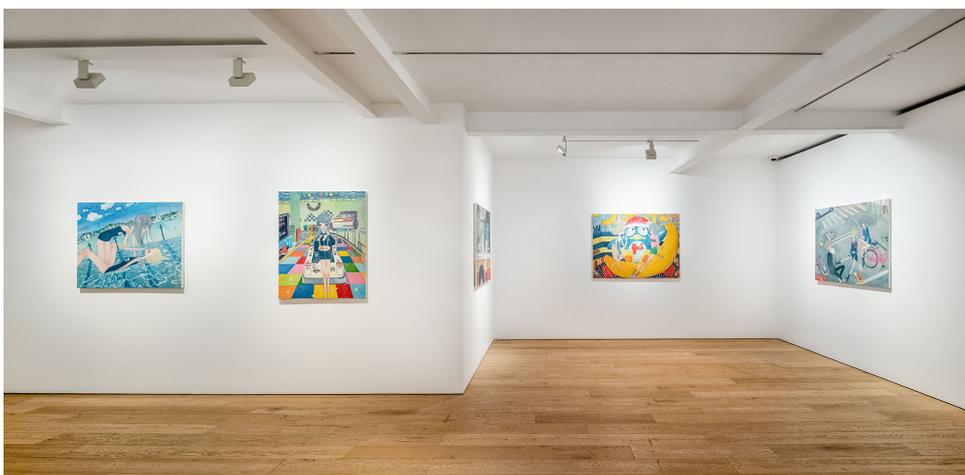
This exploration of the real world is again embodied in her recent solo exhibition, "Let's make the universe a better place" at Perrotin's Seoul gallery. Showcasing 16 drawings and 10 works on canvas, the exhibition was weaved in the manner of a sci-fi story set in the future, Takano tells me, of a Japanese girl and a Korean girl becoming best friends. Takano feels this exhibition was somewhat a timing of fate. "Just before starting to plan this solo exhibition in South Korea, I was coincidentally reading the book *Kim Ji Young, Born 1982*, [that] my friend had given me," says Takano. "Until then, I didn't know much about South Korea, even though we are close to each other; have similar faces and cultures, and I even had previously been there to hold an exhibition. Now, for the first time, I felt [that] we are the same."



Aya Takano, let's go, to the battle, 2020, oil on canvas, 162 x 130cm. ©2020 Aya Takano/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Image courtesy of Perrotin.



"Let's make the universe a better place" installation view at Perrotin Seoul, 2020. Photo: Hyunjun Lee. ©2020 Aya Takano/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Image courtesy of Perrotin.



“Let’s make the universe a better place” installation view at Perrotin Seoul, 2020. Photo:

Hyunjun Lee. ©2020 Aya Takano/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Image

courtesy of Perrotin.

“I was inspired by her, deciding to paint the story of a South Korean girl and a Japanese girl in a bad-girl-meets-good-girl narrative,” she says. In researching for her story, Takano visited Seoul, and visited a local girls school with a South Korean woman who was born in 1982—drawing a parallel with the book—observing the building from outside and sharing bygone stories. “She told me that the South Korean school system derives from Japan and is very similar,” says Takano. “That was the moment I felt I could finally paint. I believe it was a day off and the students were not around, but I felt as though they were there by looking at the buildings similar [to ours] and feeling the same oppression.” The friendship forged between the two female protagonists in this new suite of works reflects her thoughts on the complexity of the female psyche in a society where our values and choices are influenced by the media and external forces. “Being a Japanese woman, of whom the country still has strong male-dominated values, I feel that feelings such as a kind of resignation, carefreeness, frustration and joy are all intertwined,” she tells me. “Since I am a woman, I can

only understand the perspective of women. However, I believe [the notion of] a 'female' is formed by forces from outside and from within."

While science fiction previously gave Takano a portal to escape from the discomfort of the dystopian notions binding the real world, manifested in her art and manga, her imagined universe is now a poignant commentary on her personal values. Through her two female protagonists, depicted in intimate moments of emotional connection set against our contemporary world of popular culture, with elements of fantasy, Takano hopes to express that "every moment is connected to a place that goes beyond the common good and evil, and to a transcendental moment that goes beyond the everyday world."



Aya Takano, hello friend, cheer up, 2020, oil on canvas, 91 x 116.7cm. ©2020 Aya Takano/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Image courtesy of Perrotin.