MADSAKI

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MADSAKI identifies as a third culture kid. Born in Osaka in 1974, raised in New Jersey, and now based in Tokyo, the artist draws on his experiences of living between multiple cultures to create his vibrant, spray-painted works, which interweave pop iconography and personal memories. However, he had begun his artistic career much differently. When he graduated from New York’s Parsons School of Design in 1996, he was making geometric paintings—compositions that left him uninspired and creatively stunted. It was years later, when he was forced to return to Japan from the United States, that he moved away from using brushes and picked up paint cannisters, developing spray-painted, text-based works in response to the language barrier that he was confronted with in his new surroundings. His childhood recollections of New York in the 1980s—specifically of the city’s graffiti and his excursions to art museums—also propelled his work, most notably the series “Wannabe” (2015– ). With “Wannabe,” MADSAKI reinterprets and hybridizes fine art pieces with his noisy graffiti aesthetic. He simultaneously acknowledges the legacies of these works and the genius of their renowned authors, while interrogating the very parameters that deem these works masterpieces. Amid preparations for his first solo show in Hong Kong, to be presented by Perrotin, MADSAKI sat down with AAP to discuss growing up as a third culture kid, inhabiting the minds of Old Masters, his relationship with graffiti, and his inspirations for the coming show.
How does your identity as a third culture kid inform your practice?

Everything in my work comes from my experiences, and fragments of my memory. For instance, the cartoons that I paint are the ones that I grew up watching and know by heart. I went to a Japanese school in Queens, New York. At the time [the late 1980s and early ’90s] Japanese people were moving to the US because of Japan’s bubble economy. There were Japanese TV programs every Saturday but it was mostly dramas, not anime. I was exposed to anime through my friends. We had to commute on a yellow school bus and all these kids had comic books and videos, so we just swapped. That’s the only way I could’ve known about that part of Japanese culture. At the same time, my dad loved art so he was always bringing me to museums. I was looking at these cartoons and at famous artworks. There was no “this is high art.” I didn’t understand that. To me it’s the same thing, like an Instagram feed.

Whether they’re image- or text-based, your works can be seen as self-portraiture. What first prompted you to incorporate personal elements into your images?

After graduating in 1996, I was painting geometric compositions everyday with acrylic or gouache, and brushes. I hit a wall and got so bored of what I was doing. It wasn’t me and I couldn’t do it anymore. I was forced to go back to Tokyo in 2004 because I didn’t get a US green card or visa. No one understood English in Japan so I was always talking to myself throughout the day like a psycho. One day I just said I’m going to write what I’m mumbling all day—like a conversation—and I had fun doing it. But I was doing words because I didn’t want to paint. I wasn’t feeling it.
But you started to paint again and exhibited your spray-painted “Wannabe” series for the first time in 2015. How did that transition happen?

Watching cartoons and museum-hopping made me realize that I wanted to make famous art pieces. I wanted to become a famous artist, but I was just a starving artist. So, I thought, let’s pretend that I’m the famous dude. Let’s become Vincent van Gogh, let’s become Claude Monet. That’s how “Wannabe” started. I just wanted to be. It kind of was a joke, but it was also serious, because I had lost the desire and the energy to paint. My reasoning was if I became Monet, maybe I could enjoy the painting process again. As I started doing it, I started to feel that painting was fun.

For the series, I purposely chose to appropriate paintings that everyone, even people without art education, would be able to recognize—works that are often reproduced. To me, a Van Gogh being sold as a poster at a mall for USD 3.99 was funny. If I’m painting Rembrandt, I study first. I read or look up his paintings, and I try to think like I’m him. But the tool I use is spray cans. I don’t even touch the canvas. So, I think what if Rembrandt used spray cans, how would he use it? Using his own technique and style of painting, how would he express his subject? One reason why I like doing “Wannabe” is that I can become the artist when I’m painting and I understand their solutions. But I’m too lazy to paint the faces so I just make them smiley faces.

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Is the smiley face the last thing that you do?

Yes, it’s the most nerve-wracking part that I save for last. Everybody thinks it’s easy, but it’s so hard. When I first started it, it was something that I had to redo many times. Something little can change the whole thing. It’s the soul of the painting, so if I fuck it up, the whole composition is messed up. There are days where I can just whip it out. But some days I don’t feel it so I leave the face and I just go home. The next day, if I feel good, I’ll do the face. It’s the most emotional part.

What is your relationship to graffiti and its associations with vandalism?

I moved to the US in 1980 when I was six. My dad picked me up from the airport and I hopped in the car. New York was a mess in the ’80s. The walls on the street were bombed with graffiti, and there were burning cars and tires on the roads. It was ghetto. Tokyo was colorful, bright. I know New York has colors but when I first landed as a kid, I thought New York was like a black-and-white film. So, when we were driving down the highway from the airport, all this colorful graffiti just popped out. As a kid, I couldn’t read but just the colors, the ecstasy of the colors was amazing, and I can still remember them vividly. I didn’t know what it was back then, but as I started growing up, I realized, oh, it’s called graffiti. I don’t see it as vandalism. It’s just there, like a city tree, and it’s beautiful.

What is your view on bringing graffiti into white-cube gallery spaces?
I think real graffiti writers don’t like to bring graffiti into the gallery space. But I’m not a graffiti writer; I just use the same tools that they’re using. My studio is nasty. There are drips and sprays of paint everywhere. My paintings look like they’re part of the walls and the floor, but when I bring them to a white-cube space, they look beautiful, like a butterfly. All the dripping inks against the pristine walls—I like that contrast.

In the past few years you’ve shifted from painting cartoon characters to painting a series on your wife. Why?

Painting my wife is fun. It’s a record of my wife. And when I die, maybe it’ll survive. With everything else that I do, it’s like I’m a different artist, but with paintings of my wife, it’s just me. If I do Andy Warhol, the color and composition is given, it’s like I have Google Maps directing me. But for my own painting, there is no map.

What will you be presenting at your coming show at Perrotin Hong Kong?

I’m bringing paintings based on films that I grew up watching in the 1990s, featuring Stephen Chow and Bruce Lee, for example. As with “Wannabe,” I chose to recreate famous scenes. In some cases, the frames are simply the most memorable scenes for me, though when it becomes too personal, people just don’t get it, so I try to use the famous shots. I’m also bringing paintings based on Andy Warhol’s images. Warhol is doing a big exhibition in New York [at the Whitney Museum of American Art], so I thought it would be fun. I love Warhol, he made art pop. He made Brillo, a plain Brillo, into art.
What was the process of making these Warhol works like?

Warhol used silk screens and I use spray cans. The way I use spray cans is untraditional. I used to paint with brushes so I use a spray can as if it were a brush—that’s why there are all these drip marks in my work. I thought recreating silkscreen images with spray cans would be a challenge because it’s really hard to express what Warhol expressed through a different medium. For instance, Warhol’s black is just [solid] black, but if I paint it so it looks the same, it’s too boring. So, I have to think of a way to put my flavor in it, and it can’t be worse than Warhol because I respect him. So it was challenging. I can’t do Jean-Michel Basquiat. His paintings are already all dripping, all movement. But the tighter the painting, the more enjoyable it is because I can destroy it. I could color out of the lines, and people would still be able to tell it’s an Andy Warhol.
MADSAKI’s “If I Had a Dream” will be on view at Perrotin, Hong Kong, from July 17 to August 17, 2019.

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