

PRESSBOOK

MADSAKI

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Madsaki: Just a little crazy

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MADSAKI (one name only, please) has a lovely smile – for an artist whose trademark is portraits of people weeping. Except that those might not be tears you see.

The Japanese painter-sculptor, in Bangkok last Tuesday for the opening of his exhibition “Combination Platter” at Central Embassy, won’t say what the “runny” eyes signify. He does the eyes with a blast of spray paint, the paint obeys the laws of gravity, and you get a trickle of pigment.

It’s up to the viewer how it’s interpreted, he says, and every interpretation is valid.



Madsaki stands with “Le Reve 2” (2017), offering no apologies at all to Picasso, the original dreamer./courtesy Galerie Perrotin

Madsaki is a rising star in contemporary art, having scored solo shows last year in Tokyo and Seoul and now coming to Bangkok for the first time – and with one massive new piece in tow that’s never been exhibited anywhere else.

This is a five-metre-tall “totem pole” of stacked cartoonish letters spelling out the artist’s name.



Madsaki's totem pole is being shown for the first time anywhere right here in Bangkok.

Another highlight of the show is a 13-metre-wide painting crowded with his favourite cartoon characters, from the Simpsons and the South Park kids to Little Orphan Annie. Madsaki seems to be defying the laws of copyright with this one.

“It’s kind of a bizarre self-portrait,” he laughed. “This painting was first shown in Vancouver, Canada, and Bangkok is the first city in Asia to see it – it hasn’t even been seen in Japan yet.”



A 13-metre-wide painting from the series “The Character” illustrates the artist’s engagement with pop culture and its symbols.

The show’s title, “Combination Platter”, refers to the artist’s own culturally mixed upbringing, as well as being a nod to a popular choice on Chinese-food takeaway menus in America. Madsaki spent most of his youth in New York, where he graduated from the Parsons School of Design.

In the United States, the great “melting pot” of nationalities and cultures, he developed his street-art attitude and began questioning the premises by which art gains value. He mingles urban graffiti, Hollywood films and comic characters like Doraemon and SpongeBob Square Pants and forges cheeky replications of Picasso and Da Vinci masterpieces.

The result is a dialogue that complicates what initially seems familiar. These are spontaneous creations that mix cultural traditions and storytelling.



“Salvator Mundi 2” (2017) from the “Wannabe” series, which replicates and transforms some of history’s most famous paintings.

One of Madsaki’s biggest fans is fellow Japanese Takashi Murakami, a relative giant in contemporary art who “fell for him” upon encountering the younger man’s art on Instagram. He bought dozens of his pieces for his personal “Superflat” collection and arranged for last year’s solo exhibition in Tokyo.

Murakami thinks Madsaki “may have bottomless talent”. Madsaki calls Murakami his master – and his boss.



In the “Movie” series, Madsaki extracts scenes from famous films.

WHAT’S THE DEAL WITH SCOOPING UP CLASSIC PAINTINGS AND FAMOUS CARTOON CHARACTERS FOR YOUR ORIGINAL PIECES?

I don’t see copying masterpieces and famous comic characters as insulting them at all, but rather as if I’m reinterpreting them as slang words. And I grew up in the US melting pot, where everything is flattened out to be the same, so I think, whether it’s Bugs Bunny or Picasso, it’s all the same.

IS IT HARDER TO EARN A LIVING AS AN ARTIST IN JAPAN OR IN THE STATES?

It’s hard in both places. In the States, if you throw a rock in any direction, you hit an artist. I understand the good and bad sides of both countries. I just pick the good sides and create my own style.

But, yes, it’s tough in both countries. I’m 44 years old. I started painting when I graduated, but my life only really began when I met Murakami two years ago, so before that I was a starving artist. That explains it all.



"Riders on the Storm" (2017), made with acrylic aerosol paint

TELL US ABOUT THE NAME MADSAKI. IS THERE BOOZE IN THE STORY?

I worked as a bicycle messenger from 1999 to 2003 and after work every day my friends would say, "Let's go drink mad sake!" [They meant drink a lot of sake.] And they'd say, "It is you, Madsaki!" and I liked the name.

YOU TAKE A LOT OF INSPIRATION FROM THE MOVIES. WHICH ONE'S YOUR FAVOURITE?

The one I've watched most is "Goodfellas" by Martin Scorsese. I've seen it over 300 times. I did a painting of the scene where the main character gives his wife a gun.

TELL US ABOUT THE MAMMOTH PAINTING WITH ALL THE CARTOON CHARACTERS.

I grew up watching both Japanese and American cartoons, so I know all

the characters, like Big Bird from "Sesame Street". That's where I learned English.

In my painting, Big Bird has the F-word on a sign. He would never use that word, but I like them to do things they wouldn't normally do. So it's like a self-portrait in a bizarre way.



Madsaki explains that his name means exactly what you think it does.

DO YOU REPLICATE THE MASTERPIECES FROM MEMORY OR COPY FROM A PICTURE OF THE ORIGINAL?

I make a first draft copying the size and composition exactly. But when I start painting, it becomes my own. The cartoons are done the same way. When I draw, I do it perfectly, but when I'm painting and spraying, it's just done messily.

There are plenty of artists who can copy masterworks much more beautifully than I can. I'm not interested in painting beautifully or nicely. To me, ugly is beautiful. The funny thing is that, whatever my teachers at univer

sity said I should or shouldn't do, I always did exactly the opposite.

IS THERE A MESSAGE TO YOUR TRADEMARK TEARDROPS?

It's just drips. You spray paint on the face and it drips. There is a message, but I would rather the viewers use their

imagination. My art is fun, and I want them to enjoy it.

WHAT FACIAL EXPRESSION IS THE MOST CHALLENGING TO PAINT WITH YOUR SPRAY DOTS?

The two eye-dots and the smiley smile look so easy, but they're the hardest parts. I save them for last, because you really have to put some emotion into it.

If I'm not feeling anything, I can't paint. I'll set it aside for a week or two days, whatever. When I'm in the mood, I'll do that and the outcome really depends on the mood. Normally, when I'm sad, it comes out quite good.



DO YOU EVER RUN OUT OF INSPIRATION?

If I do, I just go to sleep and say the hell with it. I became a messenger because I got sick of painting and wanted to forget all about art. I was riding a bicycle for eight or nine hours a day for three years, and then I went back to painting.

I take it easy. I'm serious about art, but not that serious. Everything I do, even if it's not necessarily related to art, can somehow become an inspiration and motivation.



SOUVENIRS FOR SANITY

While the exhibition continues (through June 3), the store Siwilai is selling limited-edition Madsaki tote bags,

T-shirts, ceramics and skateboard decks.