

PRESSBOOK

MR.

Kaleidoscope Asia

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MR. 先生

INTERVIEW BY
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Page 79: High School Story—Satsuki-tan & Miyabi-Iyuru: Favorite, 2013
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- AA You often represent youth as inhabiting a world of fantasy. What is fantasy to you?
- MR My own personal fantasy is to become a young girl myself.
- AA Can you tell me more about this obsession over youth? What is so enthralling about the young girl, for you and generally—as it seems to be a pretty widespread sentiment in Japanese culture?
- MR These things are the self portrait of Japan in its defeated, puppet state. It's a special state that perhaps can only be understood by actually living here and directly experiencing the unique and disgustingly muddy waters of self deception and self hatred that seep through our daily life. In my life, I've encountered my share of unreasonableness and conflict in interactions with my blood relatives. The world of *otaku* culture was a place where I could soothe these wounds. For me, images of cute young girls carry the same sort of healing beauty and love that many people find in religion.
- AA A unique concept that describes the quality of "cuteness" in the context of Japanese culture is *kawaii*. *Moe*, too, is a Japanese slang word that refers to a special kind of "adorable," mainly as applied to idealized young female characters. Can you explain what *kawaii* and *moe* mean to you, also to the benefit of a non-Japanese reader who might not be familiar with these concepts? How are they rooted in, and eloquent to, Japanese culture today?
- MR *Moe* is an idea of cuteness that men with particular *otaku* preferences find in the innocence of young girls, but I think before you can grasp this idea you have to contemplate the nature of post-war Japan as a nation. In the process of reestablishing the nation, Japan was left in an endless loop of constant self-doubt. The resulting sense of impotence, I think, developed into a mental structure where one finds it justifiable to constantly idealize innocence in the abstract, because it is impossible to grow up and bear responsibility, or to believe in something and grow from there. This must seem bizarre in Western society. When I try to be true to myself in creating my work, this reality keeps surfacing again and again, getting morphed, reinterpreted and expanded.
- AA Do you find that these concepts are connected to an attempt at escape from reality, perhaps as a form of rebellion against the authority and engagement of the adult world?
- MR I don't believe they can be classified as simply running from reality. Like in the Matrix, it feels like your mind has been invaded and is being controlled by something outside of your power. This is especially true in Japan, where we lost so much of our national identity after our defeat in World War II and where it requires a kind of reckless abandon to have confidence in your own individual existence. The Japanese expressions of *kawaii* and *moe* gain speed from this environment. My own demons feel linked on an emotional level with the direction Japan has taken in the post-war era. At the time anime, manga and *otaku* culture were first developing, there was still a collective hope for a better future but now, it seems like there is a dark air over everyone and in order to purify themselves from these feelings, they make works which are cheerful and completely absent of shadow. This is a rather unsettling result but in truth, I am trying to express the same thing in my works. I try to offer up a vivid portrayal of otaku culture, as well as the negative aspects of post-war Japan. Although these things are negative, there is also a certain nostalgia, a vision of scenes from my childhood. From the time I was born, my home had a color television and there was lots of anime on TV. So I had one eye on anime from the time I came into this world. Watching television is free, so even a poor person had plenty of opportunities to see these shows. In some ways, I am trying to crystallize this poor people's culture and put it on canvas. Also, anime and manga are more pure and have a clearer sense of right and wrong than the real world. There is an incorruptibility that is maintained there that can't be maintained in real life, and that is where my longing lies.
- AA Which is to say that under the glossy and colourful cheerfulness of your works, we should devise a reflection upon solitude and social anxiety in the contemporary world, and particularly in Japan?
- MR While it's true that my own past, my environment, and my emotional being have all seen their share of dark moments, as an artist, I am actually aiming to create images of a hopeful future.
- AA Your recent body of work is a response to the post-disaster fear of the Japanese people since the tsunami and nuclear accident in



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“Anime and manga have a clearer sense of right and wrong than the real world. There is an incorruptibility that is maintained there that can't be maintained in real life, and that is where my longing lies.”

2011. How did you react to this event as a Japanese citizen and as an artist?

- MR People on the coast of Tohoku, who were directly impacted by the tsunami and the nuclear incident, are those who experienced the true terror. People in eastern Japan watched the nightmare unfold on TV with much trepidation, and had difficulties with resource distribution, electricity rationing, and plenty of worry about nuclear radiation. I am in this category and have no choice but to communicate the reality of that position. In the days after the disasters, I was working on paintings and did not immediately visit the areas affected. It was a very frustrating time.
- AA Would you describe your imaginary as utopic or dystopic?
- MR In the post Fukushima world since 3/11, I think you can clearly call it a dystopia. But in visual terms, the work has actually grown more pop and lavish.
- AA How has your pictorial style evolved?
- MR Compared to the recent trend of printing large works on canvas, in today's contemporary art

world, my method of painting by hand seems awfully old fashioned. However, I too frequently use large printouts in my process, to explore the structure of a work as well as the color arrangement, so I'm not completely cut off from technology. I also note that many of the gadgets which are referenced in my paintings emerge from the Internet and it is impossible for me to think of a production environment that does not involve the Internet in some way. ☺

Mr. (Japanese, b. 1969) is an artist who lives and works in Saitama near Tokyo. He is represented by Galerie Perrotin, Paris/Hong Kong; Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York; and Takashi Murakami's Kaikai Kiki Gallery, Tokyo, where he is also a founding member.

The exhibition “Live On: Mr.'s Japanese Neo-Pop” is currently on view at the Seattle Asian Art Museum through 15 April.

Alessio Ascari is founder and editor-in-chief of Kaleidoscope and Kaleidoscope Asia.